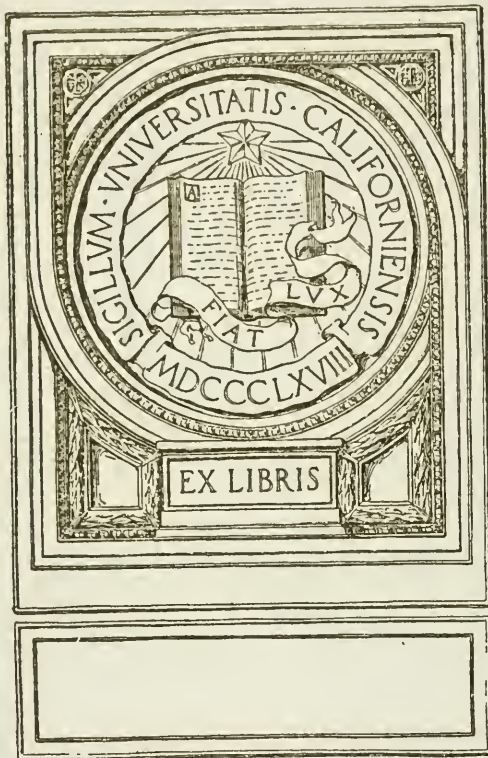




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LIVING OR DEAD

VOL. II.



LIVING OR DEAD

A Novel

BY
HUGH CONWAY

AUTHOR OF
A FAMILY AFFAIR," "CALLED BACK," "DARK DAYS," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES
VOL. II.

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1886

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LIVING OR DEAD.



LIVING OR DEAD.

CHAPTER I.

A DESERTED HOME.

THE weather was glorious when we left London. We decided to go to Llandudno by rail, and start from there on our easy journey to Lord Rothwell's. Our guns and heavy baggage we despatched to await our arrival, and contented ourselves with a knapsack apiece, Valentine only adding a colour-box and sketching-book. He had been over the ground before, but was quite willing to see its beauties again. We started in high spirits, resolved to do exactly as we thought fit—to walk, ride,

saunter, or stay in one place as the mood took us. Valentine was radiant, both in apparel and spirits, and I was as happy as I could be without Claudine. The days passed rapidly and pleasantly. We steamed through the Menai Straits, we explored Conway, we lingered about Bettws-y-coed, and we drove round Snowdon, raved at the effects of light and shade in the Nant Francon Pass with its purple slate quarries, dreamed some time at Capel Curig, and then started to make easy stages across Denbigh, Flint, and Cheshire until we reached our ultimate destination. Some days we walked, some days we drove. We were neither of us enthusiastic pedestrians, so felt no shame in chartering a conveyance when we could find one, and throwing our knapsacks under the seat, jogging along comfortably to our next resting-place for the night.

It was the 13th of August. Time was

running short, but we had not much further to go, so, the morning being fine, we decided to walk that day, or part of the day. If we changed our minds we trusted to getting a vehicle of some sort from a farmhouse or village on the road. We were now almost on the borders of Derbyshire. The road was good, and the country round about smiling. Harvesting was in full swing, and every one we met looked merry, contented, and busy. Valentine was in the highest spirits. He trolled out snatches of songs as we walked, regardless of the passers-by or the reapers at work across the hedge, who paused in astonishment and admiration as his gay voice carried the liveliest numbers of the liveliest operas to their untutored ears. We strode along at some three and a half miles an hour, stoppages excluded, for Valentine was always stopping, now to gather a flower, now to admire a bit of landscape, and even once

or twice to sketch with rapid fingers some unusually pretty country child we chanced to meet, whose elder sister or mother, as the case might be, stood by us and gazed open-mouthed at the operation. As he sketched he always talked to the child's companion, and finished by sending her away with a smile of content and pleasure on her face, for never did the boy deserve my title of 'Child of the Sun' better than when he talked to humble members of society. He must have felt interested in them, or he never could have designed the questions he put to them about their families, belongings, income, mode of living, and other domestic topics. I expect they talked for days afterwards of the young gentleman with the bright hair and eyes, and whose fingers flashed with shining gems.

We had walked some hours, and were beginning to think of a halt, when we came to a park-wall which bounded one side of

the road, and hid all prospects in that direction from us. We walked on for the best part of a mile, and still that wall was on our right hand. As a wall it was well enough, but as a companion monotonous. We grew very tired of it, and inveighed in terms that savoured of Radicalism against the selfishness and injustice of landed magnates in shutting so much of the earth away from the public gaze. We felt an immense respect for the owner of such a wall, but we blamed him soundly. By the time we reached a lodge, which broke the dreary uniformity of the stone obstacle, we were curious as to the place it had hidden so long from our eyes. The lodge was an ordinary stone-built affair, such as forms the entrance to many grand houses. An old man in his shirt-sleeves was languidly digging in the garden that surrounded it. Valentine hailed him. The old fellow stuck his spade into the ground, left it there, and

came down to the gate. Even his surly countenance relaxed as Valentine stood smiling before him.

"So sorry to trouble you," he said, "but tell me who lives here?"

"Nobody aint lived here for many a year," answered the labourer.

"Worse and worse," said Valentine, turning to me, "an absentee. I shall turn communist. Can we go over the place?" he asked of the old man.

"Nobody goes over this place, they don't."

"Not even one of those great sirs who give up their parks a dozen times a year to let the people breathe," said Valentine for my benefit. "But we can come inside and look round, I suppose?"

"Not as I know of," answered the son of toil.

"I wonder if half a crown would make you change your views on the subject."

The old fellow held out his hand. "The gate aint locked," he said, "and I am hard of hearing. I sha'n't stop you if you like to come in." He pocketed the coin, went back to his spade, and turning his back to us dug away as before.

Valentine laid his hand on the handle, but I held back. "I hate going into places where I've no right," I said.

"So do I, but somehow I have taken a fancy to look at this particular place. Let us be Cockneys for once, and hold nothing sacred. A park-wall which, judging from the portion we have seen, must be some miles in extent, is worth looking at from the park side. Then I never waste money, and want the value of that half-crown. Come along."

And together we passed through the gate, and walked up the winding road to the house we saw in the distance.

It was a lovely place—a place to make

the best regulated mind feel envious. Acres and acres of undulating sward, spotted here and there with clumps of fine old elms. But sheep were grazing all over, and even at the distance away we were we could see that all the windows of the large house were sightless with closed shutters.

"Let us walk across and see how far the park extends," I said.

"No," said Valentine, "I want to see the house. The inside if possible, anyway the outside."

So we walked up to the house. It was a large pile of buildings, a part evidently very old. Apparently it had been added to at different periods. It was a low house with a long front. A terrace ran the whole length. A tower, scarcely an ornament, rose from the right, and no doubt commanded fine views of the country round. Except the park, which was evidently used as farm land, there was a neglected look

about the whole place, and with the closed shutters and deserted appearance the house presented I should have thought it uninhabited had I not seen a thin stream of smoke arising from one of the back chimneys.

“Who does it belong to, I wonder?” I said.

“Can’t tell,” answered Valentine. “In Chancery, I should say. Some of your beastly lawyer’s work, Philip. Look at the marble pots on the terrace, without a flower in them for years.”

Just then a figure emerged from the back of the house. It looked like that of a middle-aged woman attired in sombre garments. She came towards us.

“Now we shall find out who is the happy or unhappy owner,” said Valentine. “The genius of the place is approaching.”

“Most likely we shall be ordered out of the place as two intruding excursionists.

What with your rings and wonderful appearance altogether, there is no knowing what we may be taken for."

"Never fear, Philip. I have a way; mark the ultimate result, Philip. I have a way with people."

His way was a cunning one. The lady approached us. Then she was a lady no longer. A good homely sort of a body, housekeeper or something. But Valentine ignored this. He raised his hat and apologized most gracefully for our intrusion. We had passed that way, the gate was open, so we had taken advantage. The house being shut as it seemed had given us the idea that the family were from home. We had ventured nearer to look at such an interesting old building. Had we known we were disturbing the privacy of one of the ladies of the house nothing would have induced us, &c., &c. I suppose nothing would have been more unlikely than one

of the ladies of such a house as that we stood before appearing in her own person to chase a couple of intruders, or that an ordinary creature like the one before us could possibly be a lady of the house. No one knew this better than Valentine, but he knew that the apparent mistake would not be unpleasant; that no servant lives who does not feel a glow of satisfaction at being taken for her mistress. Not servants only. I remember a waiter at a seaside hotel telling me he had made about fifty pounds a year more than his companions from a habit he had of calling all commercial travellers, clerks, and young men generally who were spending their holidays at his hotel captain or colonel as most befitting their age.

The lady in black was mollified. "These are private grounds," she said, "but you are at liberty to walk round if you please, although there is not much to see."

“But the house must be most interesting. May we not go over it?”

“Impossible, gentlemen. It has been shut up for years. No one is allowed inside.”

“That makes us all the more anxious,” said Valentine with a smile. “Could you not strain a point in our favour? We are friends of Lord Rothwell, whose name I dare say you know about these parts.”

The housekeeper curtseyed at the name. “Yes, I know his lordship well. I have known him for years. Has he returned from his travels?”

“Yes, we are due at Mirfield to-morrow. Now, will you show us over the house?”

“I would oblige you if I could, but my orders are so strict, gentlemen. Please walk through the grounds and gardens. They used to be very fine when they were properly kept, but now there is little to see.”

Valentine tried further persuasion, but the guardian of the deserted castle was inexorable. Finding his efforts unavailing he laughed pleasantly.

“Then, madame, we must content ourselves with the outdoor beauties. Who did you say owned this place?”

“It is the property of Sir Laurence Estmere,” answered the housekeeper, with dignity.

I glanced at Valentine. He had turned white as a sheet, and betrayed such emotion that I hastened to ask question after question in order to distract the attention of the lady in black.

“Does not Sir Laurence live here?” I asked.

“He has not lived here for many years.”

“How strange! Such a beautiful place, too. He prefers travelling about, I suppose.”

“I suppose he does, sir.”

“Is he a young man?”

"A middle-aged man. He must be about fifty by now."

Valentine had recovered his self-possession, and reassumed somewhat of his airy manner. He took my arm. "Let us walk round, Philip," he said. "Thank you for your permission, Mrs. ——"

"My name is Payne, sir," said the housekeeper, seeing he appeared to expect the information.

"I like to know the names of the people I talk to," he said. "Thank you, Mrs. Payne, we will walk round the grounds. Perhaps we shall see you again as we go out."

"I dare say you will, gentlemen," answered Mrs. Payne, with perhaps a dream of gratuity in her head.

Valentine said nothing until we had strolled to some little distance from the house, and had seen Mrs. Payne's sombre figure disappear. Then he turned to me,

and, with a bitter accent in his voice, said :—

“No wonder I was drawn to look over this place ; I must have been born here, Philip. This is Estmere Court, where, some twenty-five years ago, my mother came, a fair young girl, with every prospect of a happy life before her. This is the house my father left for the sake of some wicked doubt which grew and grew in his brain. He has never been here since. Philip, it is hard, very hard, to come to one’s rightful home an entire stranger. Oh, if I could find out the truth of all, and set my mother right in my father’s eyes ! If I could find out why he ever doubted her ! How strange it is to think that if Sir Laurence Estmere were to meet me now—here in this very place—we should not know we were father and son any more than I knew that this was his home, and, by rights, mine. He must be mad, Philip!”

“Have you ever tried to find him, to see him and convince him of his error?”

“Never—two years ago I swore I would. I went to Rothwell, the only man who could tell me anything about his whereabouts. Rothwell knew why I wanted to know it, and refused to give me any information about him. I pressed him for the reasons for his refusal, and when he told me at last, I felt I hated my father, and cared little whether I ever met him.”

“What were his reasons?”

“You are the only man I could tell, Philip; and only you, because you believe in my mother’s innocence. Rothwell told me that assuredly Sir Laurence Estmere would revile me, chase me from his presence—would curse me and bid me begone, would say in fact what that villain Chesham hinted at in your rooms that night.”

We had now walked down to a clump of trees which concealed us from every one’s

view. I took Valentine's hand and pressed it ; he returned my grasp.

"It is all a lie ; told by that devil and used by his master's angels to wreck two, or it may some day be three, of the noblest lives in Christendom. For I have heard of my father, Philip. My mother talks to me about him at times. Rothwell has told me about him. He was a young man before this wicked slander crept into his brain and warped it, one of the noblest of his time, now he is a wanderer on the face of the earth, and my mother's life has been sadness and shame. Oh Philip ! the kindest prayer I could offer for my father, is that he may never know the truth."

"Does your mother ever hear of him, even indirectly ? Are there no money affairs between them ?"

"Money from him ! No, my mother would have starved rather than take a penny from the man, the husband, who

thought that she could wrong him. No doubt he offered money, and that offer was rejected with scorn. She had her fortune which was settled on herself, so had no need to stoop, if she could have done so, to take money from Sir Laurence Estmere."

We walked on from point to point in silence, pausing now and then to look at the fine expanse of park. If Sir Laurence's estate could be measured by the park he must be a wealthy man. I pitied Valentine from my heart, and wondered how I should feel under the like circumstances. A stranger on my father's land, and disowned and repudiated by him.

"And this," said Valentine, with biting scorn, "will all be my brother's one day. That cur of a brother whom I have never seen; who has never seen or written to his mother! At least he can have no doubt as to his parentage," he added, bitterly.

We walked across the park and into the

neglected gardens. There were vases in which no flowers had grown for years ; moss and lichen hiding and staining what had once been white marble ; fountains that never played, and fish-ponds without fish. It was a miserable, unhappy-looking place to any one, and much more so to one who knew the reason of its neglect and decay. We studied the house from all points of view.

“ I must—I will go over it,” said Valentine ; “ let us find Mrs. Payne again, and make another effort ; she looked a good-tempered woman.”

Mrs. Payne, who had probably been on the look-out for us, again appeared. We praised the park and condoled with her on the terrible state the gardens were in. Again and again we urged our request to walk through the house. Valentine pleaded, flattered, and made skilful use of Lord Rothwell’s name, for we knew by some remarks

she made that he stood high in her esteem. I threw out delicate hints of pecuniary benefit which might accrue to her, and presently we saw signs of surrender.

“I don’t think I can,” she said doubtfully ; “you see my husband is away—gone to Flatham market ; he would be so vexed with me if he knew it.”

“But we only want to walk through the rooms, Mrs. Payne.”

“There really is nothing to see, gentlemen. The furniture is all covered up, the china and ornaments all mostly locked away. I don’t think I could open the shutters to give you light enough.”

“Oh, we’ll open the shutters,” said Valentine. “Now, Mrs. Payne, come along, there’s a dear lady, and I’ll send you a black silk dress from London, and I’ll give you a kiss when we leave if your husband hasn’t come back from market.”

“Well, I never !” said Mrs. Payne, laugh-

ing; "I haven't had such a thing as that said to me for years and years. You are the most persistent young gentleman I ever saw."

"I am; I am noted for it, Mrs. Payne. I always get my own way. Come along, lead the way; through the back door, I suppose. I feel as though you were quite an old friend of mine, Mrs. Payne. After we have looked at the house you shall make us some tea. Come along, it's all settled now; a black silk dress any way, and a kiss, if you like."

Mrs. Payne was conquered. She turned and led the way to the back of the house. We followed her through a yard which led to the servants' quarters. She opened a stout iron clamped door, and Valentine Estmere stood within the walls, or rather the kitchen walls, of his ancestors. It was a sorry entrance for a child of the house.

Along darkened stone passages, which

seemed interminable and intricate, we followed our guide—past doors that had not been opened for years. Our foot-falls rang through the silence of the house. Then through a wooden door, with a faded baize one next to it, and we stood in the large hall of Estmere Court. As we followed Mrs. Payne, Valentine whispered to me, “Find out if she has been long in the family. I will make some excuse by-and-by. Say I want to rest or something ; then talk to her alone, and learn all you can. This visit may be fatality, Philip.”

The hall was a dreary place, it was spacious and floored with tessellated pavement. The rafters and woodwork were of dark carved oak, looking gloomy and heavy in the dusk. High-backed chairs, spectral and large in their white unshapely bags, were ranged round an oak-table of gigantic dimensions which filled the centre. Various doors opened from the hall into their

respective apartments, and from one end of it the grand-staircase started.

Mrs. Payne had resigned herself to our intrusion, and was adopting the manner of the regular custodian of show places.

“This, gentlemen, is the large drawing-room,” she said rather pompously, throwing open the door and revealing a cavern of darkness into which she plunged boldly. We heard a struggle with a refractory bolt, the swing of a falling bar, a creaking sound, and one of the heavy shutters opened and the darkness became light.

The drawing-room was a lofty and noble apartment, but its furniture, like all the rest, clad in unsightly pinafores, the chandeliers swathed in the same way, hanging like gigantic onions from the ceiling. The carpet rolled up in one corner. Certainly, as our guide warned us, there was not much to see in Estmere Court. Mrs. Payne unveiled the beauties of one or two fine old

cabinets for our benefit, and even uncovered partially a chair, that we might form some idea as to the hidden charms of itself and its brethren. There was a musty, close, unwholesome smell about the room, and if, as our informant averred, it was more than twenty years since it had been inhabited, it was not to be wondered at. As with the drawing-room, so with the dining-room, billiard-room, and library, except that in the latter, by lifting up the winding-sheets which covered the tall oak cases from top to bottom, I could ascertain that a noble library of rare and costly volumes lined its walls.

The dining-room and the picture-gallery contained many fine works of art, and of course the portraits of Valentine's ancestors, handsome, dark-browed men and fair women and dark women. Over these we lingered, reading the names on the frames, or hearing all our voluble conductor could tell us

about them. I, who knew nothing of my own lineage, felt a thrill of envy as I listened to her histories of my friends' forbears. But ancestors are little good to any man whilst his most immediate one denies his right to them. Valentine moved from room to room mechanically. He spoke little, and if he laughed at any of Mrs. Payne's remarks his laugh was harsh and forced. Having looked at all the portraits, he said—

“Is there no portrait of Sir Laurence Estmere—the present Sir Laurence?”

“No, sir ; none among these.”

“But there must be some one, somewhere in the house. Let me see it.”

He spoke so peremptorily that the worthy Mrs. Payne looked astonished and annoyed.

“There is a portrait, of course. It is of Sir Laurence and Lady Estmere—Millais painted it soon after their marriage.”

"Where is it? Let me see it at once!"

"You cannot see it, sir," answered Mrs. Payne, coldly.

"Mrs. Payne," said Valentine, "listen to me. I will give you fifty pounds—I am not joking—fifty pounds, if you will let me see that picture by Millais. You doubt me? Philip, what money have you?"

I handed him my pocket-book. He took out thirty pounds, then from his own pocket took twenty more.

"There, Mrs. Payne, let me see that picture, and I will give you all that money. It is a large sum for such a little thing, but I don't mind that."

Her face flushed. To a woman in her position it was a great sum of money.

"I can't earn it, sir," she said sorrowfully. "I wish I could."

"It is only to let me look at a picture for five minutes."

“ Yes, but I can’t get at it.”

“ Where is it, then ? In the house, I suppose ? ”

“ In the strong-room.”

“ How could a picture get in the strong-room ? ”

“ When Sir Laurence left home last he ordered that picture to be taken down from its place. At first he said it was to be burnt. Then he changed his mind, and ordered it to be put in the strong-room. You see, gentlemen, Sir Laurence went away on account of a misunderstanding with her ladyship. That was why the picture was taken down and locked away.”

Valentine saw by her manner it was hopeless, so thrust the bribe back into his pocket.

“ Who has the key ? ” he asked.

“ Sir Laurence, I expect ; I never heard. But why are you so anxious to see it ? ” she asked, almost suspiciously.

“Don’t ask me, there’s a dear, good woman. You may know some day!”

“If you want to see a likeness of her ladyship I could show you a little drawing—her ladyship and the children.”

“Yes, let me see it!” said Valentine eagerly.

Mrs. Payne left us, and in a minute returned with a small framed drawing. “Sir Laurence forgot about it, I suppose,” she said, as she cleared the dust from the glass. It was but a sketch, but drawn by a master, probably Millais; perhaps a preparatory sketch for the larger work. It was Lady Estmere, a girl and a young wife at twenty-one. Just as I had always imagined she must have looked! Her hair, bright golden, and a look of joy and sweetness of life in her whole bearing. Who, save a madman, could have associated her with sin! She held a baby in her arms, and a dark-eyed chubby boy

was leaning on her knee. There was a bitter smile on Valentine's face as he pointed with his jewelled finger to the infant in her arms—himself!

We both looked long and earnestly at this sketch, but made no remark. It was Sir Laurence's likeness we wanted to see. Mrs. Payne seemed surprised at the little interest the picture excited. When we returned it to her, she laid it down on some piece of furniture. "They were two beautiful boys," she said. "I wonder when I shall see either of them again?"

"Have you been long in Sir Laurence's service?" asked Valentine.

"I began as a girl of fourteen. That's a long time ago," said Mrs. Payne, with the usual sigh at the flight of time.

Valentine drew me aside to look at a picture. "She must know all," he said. "See her alone, and ask her. I cannot trust myself."

"Would you like to see the upper rooms and the tower?" asked Mrs. Payne. "You may as well see everything now."

"I don't care much about it," answered Valentine. "I dare say my friend would. I will stop here and rest, I am rather tired."

Mrs. Payne looked doubtful.

"I sha'n't steal anything, although I wanted to get into the strong-room just now. You would like to go up-stairs, Philip?"

"Very much," I replied, "if Mrs. Payne will trust you here alone."

"I want to study those two Dutch pictures, and look at the portraits again. I am an artist, you know, Mrs. Payne!"

"Indeed, sir. Well, I fancied you must be something of the kind!" No doubt she attributed Valentine's eccentric behaviour to the fact of his being an artist, and thought she might venture to leave him

alone. "Please follow me, sir," she said, and we went up the grand staircase together to the first floor, which contained the principal bed-rooms.

CHAPTER II.

THROUGH GOOD AND EVIL REPORT.

THERE was little in the up-stair rooms of Estmere Court to attract attention. Except for the fine view they commanded over park and country round they were without particular interest. But I lingered in them, as I wanted to extract what information I could from Mrs. Payne. It was my first attempt at cross-examination.

“Sir Laurence is separated from his wife, you say?” I commenced.

“Yes, sir.”

“Lady Estmere must have been very beautiful when that portrait was taken. Have you ever seen her?”

“I was in Sir Laurence’s service when he married, so of course I have seen her.”

“Who was to blame for the unfortunate disagreement, Mrs. Payne?”

She pursed up her lips. “You are very inquisitive, sir, for a stranger. Old servants never pass opinions about their master’s business.”

“Quite right,” I said; “but I feel so interested after seeing that picture of Lady Estmere and her children—besides, I have heard Lord Rothwell speak of them.”

“Then, sir, you had better ask his lordship what you want to know. Would you like to go up to the tower, or shall we return to the young gentleman, your friend?”

“One moment, Mrs. Payne. Lord Rothwell cannot know what you know about it at all. I should like to hear your account of it.”

“It can be no business of yours, sir. This is the way down.”

Mrs. Payne was immovable, so I determined on a bold stroke.

“Did you like Lady Estmere?” I asked.

“Her ladyship was loved by every one; she was the kindest and best of mistresses.”

“Then I may tell you, to account for my questions, that she is a dear friend of mine. I saw her in London a few days ago.”

Mrs. Payne looked at me with more interest than she had hitherto displayed.

“Indeed, sir, and how is her ladyship?—how is she looking?”

“She must have changed greatly, but is still very beautiful. Her hair is as white as snow.”

“Poor lady! When you see her again will you give her my respects? Hannah Jones I was then. She will remember me by that name.”

“I will. And now, Mrs. Payne, tell

me something more about her and Sir Laurence."

"There is little to tell, sir."

"That gentleman down-stairs is her youngest son—so you see I am not asking from idle curiosity."

"Oh, sir! that Master Valentine! No wonder he was so pressing to see Sir Laurence's picture. Poor young gentleman! Poor Lady Estmere! If she sinned, she has suffered for it."

"But did she sin, Mrs. Payne? Was it not all a fatal mistake?"

Mrs. Payne shook her head sadly.

"Tell me all you know," I urged. "Those who know Lady Estmere can never believe the slander. You who were with her at the time can tell where the fault lay."

"Better let sleeping dogs lie," said Mrs. Payne sadly.

"No, let us know the truth, as far as

you can tell it, once and for all. You loved her—tell me for the sake of her son. Tell me the exact facts.”

“I would much rather not, sir.”

“Tell me, bad or good; we must know, or how can we prove it a lie? Who were the slanderous tongues that poisoned Sir Laurence’s mind?”

“Oh, sir! it was not what people said—no one ever breathed a word against her till that moment. It was what Sir Laurence saw himself. He was too noble to listen, even if people had brought him tales. Oh, how could she? how could she? I never would have believed it. But he saw it.”

Mrs. Payne was weeping bitterly.

“He fancied he saw whatever aroused his suspicions, that is what you mean, Mrs. Payne.”

“No; he saw it, and I saw it too. Oh, why was I ever there! If I had not been there that night, I could believe, as you

believe, that her ladyship is a cruelly wronged woman. If he had not seen, I could have fancied I was dreaming, but we could not both have dreamt it."

She was much agitated, so I begged her to sit down.

"You have told me too much, yet not enough," I said. "Now collect yourself, and tell me everything that occurred."

"I will, sir. But don't judge her harshly—perhaps she meant no harm. They were old lovers, I believe—perhaps she still loved him, yet never meant to wrong Sir Laurence. But Sir Laurence was a proud man, and a severe man, and never forgave deceptions."

She rambled on a little longer. I said nothing, but waited for the thread of the story. I was very sad; it was so clear that Mrs. Payne believed in Lady Estmere's guilt. If I wavered for a moment in my faith, the thought of her sweet refined face,

with its true sad eyes, rose before me, and I was steadfast again.

“Oh, it was a dreadful thing, sir; death would have been nothing to it. Till my last day I shall never forget Sir Laurence’s face that night, when he found the wife he loved was false to him. But I must tell you how it all happened, or you will not understand. They were staying then at the Dower House, a little place belonging to Sir Laurence, about twenty miles from here. It is a sweet little house, a mere cottage compared to this, but they were so fond of each other that I think they loved it better than Estmere Court. For the most part they were alone there, whilst here there were nearly always visitors coming and going. They fancied the air at the Dower House was better for the children than at Estmere Court, so they would go there and stay for weeks together. Master Laurence, the heir, was about three

years old, and Master Valentine a baby in arms. I was under-nursemaid then, and a giddy girl enough, but I was fond of the children and her ladyship. There was a cousin of her ladyship's used to come on visits, both at the big house and the little one. He was a fair man and in the army. People said that at one time he had been engaged to Lady Estmere."

"That was Chesham, I suppose."

"Yes, sir. Chesham was his name. A pleasant-spoken man enough when it suited him, but a bad man. Servants find out a man's true character long before their masters and mistresses do, and we all knew he was a wicked fellow. To Sir Laurence and to Lady Estmere he was as mild and sweet as he could be, but I have seen him watching them both with the devil looking out of his eyes, and his teeth set against each other. He must have been good company, I suppose, for he often stayed with

them, and at this time was at the Dower House. One day Sir Laurence was obliged to go over to the Court on some business. He started in the morning, intending to sleep there and return the next day. The children were brought down to wish him good-bye, and see him ride off. He kissed them and Lady Estmere, and away he went, as proud and gallant a gentleman as ever crossed a horse.

“I am almost ashamed to tell you, sir, but, you see, girls and boys will be girls and boys. There was a young man—he has been my husband now for nearly twenty years—who was looking after me. He lived in a small house on the Dower Estate, and his father farmed it for Sir Laurence. I had promised to meet him that night, if I could manage it, in the garden, so about half-past ten I slipped out. The children were fast asleep, and Lady Estmere had gone to her room. It was in the front of

the house, and Sir Laurence's dressing-room adjoined it. A carriage-drive, with shrubberies each side, led to the house. The stables were some distance off. Well, I met John, and talked to him for about half-an-hour, then wished him good-night. He did not go out by the carriage-drive, but from the side of the garden, a short cut to his house. I came back again, after seeing him go off. When I got to the front of the house, I heard footsteps coming down the drive—a man's footsteps. I was afraid it was Captain Chesham, so hid myself in the shrubs until he should pass by. But it was not the Captain—it was Sir Laurence. He had come back, instead of sleeping at the Court. He must have left his horse at the stables and walked from there to the house. The moon was shining, so I could see him plainly. I was afraid of being caught, so I glanced at the house to see if I could venture to make a run for it before he

passed me. There was a light burning in Sir Laurence's dressing-room, the blind was up, and standing in the full light, visible to every one outside, were Lady Estmere and Captain Chesham. Oh, sir! if I had not seen it myself I would never have believed it."

And Mrs. Payne quite sobbed. I said nothing, I felt so bewildered at this direct and unwilling testimony.

"Her face was hidden on his shoulder, sir—her back turned to the window—her arms were round him and his arms round her, and he was kissing her forehead. I would have screamed to warn them, but I seemed deprived of my senses for a minute, and then it was too late. Sir Laurence passed me, and saw what I saw. Oh! I pray I shall never see a face change as his face changed in a moment! All the life and brightness faded from it. It became stone, and the look in his eyes was awful.

He stood watching them for at least five minutes. Had that villain Chesham looked our way he must have seen him. His tall figure stood out in the moonlight, and cast a dark shadow on the white road. Yes, he must have stood there for five or ten minutes looking at the lighted window and the figures standing there. Then Lady Estmere left that wicked man, and I saw him take the light in his hand, and in a moment the room grew dark. But outside all was light as day, and Sir Laurence still stood a few paces from me like a statue."

"Oh, Mrs. Payne!" I said vehemently, "you must have been mistaken. It was a servant, not Lady Estmere!"

"I wish I could think so. But it was her ladyship. Her wonderful long golden hair was streaming down her back. And she wore the dress she wore that evening at dinner. She always dressed in a style of her own, in peculiar colours; and I heard

the Captain ask her that day to wear that particular dress in the evening ; he said he admired it so. I thought nothing of that ; you see, they were cousins and old friends."

It was very sad and distressing ; but again I thought of Lady Estmere as I knew her, and Claudine's words, "through good and evil report," came into my mind. Anyway, I must hear all Mrs. Payne had to say.

"What did Sir Laurence do?"

"He seemed to come to life at last. Then he gave a hopeless sort of sigh, but I saw his eyes blazing. He started forward, and I thought that murder would be the end of that night's work. But he seemed to restrain and check himself, and walked up and down in front of the house for at least half-an-hour. I could not take my eyes off his face."

"And then?"

"Then the front door opened, and the

Captain came out, and stood in the porch with a lighted cigar in his mouth. I thought—I almost hoped—Sir Laurence would kill him, but he strode up to him, and looked him in the face—I suppose gentlemen don't rush at each other's throats like common people."

" "Why, Estmere, back again already!" said the Captain.

" "You villain! you utter villain!" said Sir Laurence.

"Then I hoped he would have killed him—I would—but he did not. Gentlemen can restrain themselves, I suppose. It's in the blood, perhaps."

She paused, probably considering the matter.

"Go on, please," I said. "What next?"

"He knew at once what Sir Laurence meant. 'I can give you the satisfaction due from one gentleman to another,' he said.

" "Yes,' said Sir Laurence, 'I can shoot

you through the heart by-and-by ; but that is a pitiful satisfaction.'

" ' You will hear of me at my club,' said the Captain ; ' but remember, Estmere, she was mine long before you came and stole her from me.'

" ' Go, at once,' said Sir Laurence, ' or I shall kill you now. Go ! ' Captain Chesham raised his hat and went away in the moonlight. He must have walked ten miles to the nearest town. I have never seen him since. After he had disappeared Sir Laurence clenched his fists and went a few steps after him ; then he returned, and after walking to and fro some time longer, he threw himself down on a grassy bank, and I heard him sob as I never heard human being sob before. Then I ran into the house and went to bed."

" Is that all you have to tell ? "

" All, except that I don't think he entered the house at all that night ; he was there

in the morning, and the other servants told me afterwards that her ladyship, who was the first to greet him, went to her own room looking as they never saw her look before, and shortly afterwards Sir Laurence ordered the head nurse to get the eldest boy's things ready for a journey, then he drove away with him. The next morning her ladyship and the baby went away by themselves, to London, she said. From that day to this I have never seen either of them. The servants were all paid off, the houses shut up, and my John's father put in charge of the Court. Then I married John, and ten years ago the old man died, and we were told to go on as before, living here and seeing it was kept from harm. I heard that Sir Laurence did try to shoot Captain Chesham afterwards, but did not quite kill him."

"He lamed him for life, at least."

"Yes, I heard that, and was glad of it,

for of all villains that ever lived that Chesham was the worst."

I was much distressed at hearing the good woman's tale. What should I tell Valentine? That Mrs. Payne was speaking in all sincerity, and merely related what she saw or seemed to see, I could not doubt. It was no gossip of the servants' hall she retailed. By chance she had been a witness of what had made Sir Laurence Estmere repudiate his young wife. I questioned her to the best of my ability, but found always the same clear narration of the facts. It was what she had seen herself. There could be no mistake about that. Yet, in spite of this, she spoke in terms of great affection of her late mistress, whom she willingly credited with every other virtue under the sun.

"What other servants were in the house at the time?" I asked.

"There were three maid-servants besides the head nurse and myself, and her lady-

ship's maid. It is but a small house, so only a few servants were needed."

"What was her ladyship's maid's name? Can she throw any light on it?"

"Mary Williams was her name. I have not heard anything of her for years—she went to the bad, I think. But she knew nothing about it. No one knew except me. I kept my own counsel, and should never have told you, sir, if you had not pressed so, and said, as Master Valentine's friend, you would know. I have never been a scandal-monger."

"I am sure you have not, Mrs. Payne."

"No, sir; all the servants gossiped, of course, but I told them nothing. You will give my respects to poor Lady Estmere, sir? Hannah Jones, remember."

"But can you believe she forfeited her husband's love and the position she held as his wife for such a wretch as Chesham? You say she was everything that was good."

“So she was, sir. Everything. I could have believed nothing except my own eyes. I have told you what I saw.”

“I have reason to believe that Lady Estmere has never spoken to Chesham since then. That does not look like a mad infatuation.”

“No, sir, it doesn't. But the Captain was a wicked, wicked man. Whatever he persuaded her ladyship to was for the sake of revenge, not for love of her.”

“Revenge?”

“Yes, because he was engaged to be married to her once. It was all broken off before she met Sir Laurence, yet he revenged himself for it by ruining her. He was a devil! I believe he stood at that window with her, knowing that Sir Laurence might return any moment.”

“How could he know that? Was Sir Laurence suspicious?”

“Suspicious! No, sir. He trusted her

ladyship entirely until that moment. This is what makes me say it was revenge. A few days afterwards John—my husband now—told me a strange thing, which I have often thought of since. In the morning, when Sir Laurence started, he met John's father about three miles from home. He stopped and asked him something about the farm; then, as he rode off, he called out, 'If you go up to the house tell them I have changed my mind, and shall ride back to-night. I shall be home about half-past ten or eleven.' The old man was going up to give the message, when he met the Captain. To save his old legs the walk, he told him what Sir Laurence had said about returning, and Chesham promised to make it known at the house. Now, sir, he never said a word of this to any one—certainly not to her ladyship, or she never would have stood at the open window with him just when her husband should return. Yet

he knew it, and brought her there for, I believe, the very purpose that Sir Laurence should see them."

"It is impossible; it would be the act of a fiend, not a man!"

"That Chesham was a fiend. Oh, I could tell you things I heard about him afterwards; but it would do no good."

I should have scouted the tale as absurd, had I not remembered the bitter, cold-blooded malignity the man had shown during his interview with Valentine.

"But Sir Laurence should have been told this," I said.

"He was gone, sir. We did not know where to find him. Besides, as far as I could see, it would have done her ladyship no good. It might, if possible, have made Sir Laurence more bitter against the Captain, but I expect that was not needed, sir."

I was greatly relieved by the last piece of information extracted from Mrs. Payne.

Wild as the thought was, it pointed to some diabolic plot on the part of Asmodeus. It was hard to imagine a nature so remorseless or a motive so strong as to have successfully worked out such a scheme. All speculation failed as to surmising how any ingenuity could have made Lady Estmere an unwilling participator in it, but to my mind nothing was so impossible or improbable as the idea of her stooping from her height for the love, the momentary love, of a Captain Chesham. There was something yet to be discovered, and as I rose and followed Mrs. Payne down-stairs, I vowed I would, for Valentine's sake, and for his mother's sake, devote myself to the elucidation of the mystery; and how delighted Claudine would be if, eventually, I discovered the truth!

CHAPTER III.

TRAVELLING COMPANIONS.

VALENTINE was waiting for us in the picture-gallery, among the portraits of his ancestors whose acquaintance he made for the first time to-day. He looked at me anxiously, and I fear saw little in my eyes to encourage him. He assumed a gay manner.

“I thought you and Mrs. Payne had eloped,” he said. “My friend must have seen every nook and corner in the house, I am sure.”

Mrs. Payne smiled, and looked at him with great interest.

“Well, Philip,” he said, “we must be off

now. Thank you, and good-bye, Mrs. Payne. You will please accept this."

So saying, he offered her a bank-note. She waved it aside.

"Then I shall send you the silk dress from town. I sha'n't forget it. Good-bye."

"There was something else you promised me, sir."

"So there was," said Valentine, really laughing. "To think of a lady being obliged to remind me of such a debt as that."

He leant down and gave her the salute she asked for.

"Ah, Mr. Valentine!" said the good woman, "I have kissed you thousands of times before, when you didn't know it. I was your nurse, sir."

"My friend has told you my name then. I hope you have given him good news for me."

"I am afraid not, sir. But, Mr. Valentine,

things may come right for you yet. Sir Laurence may relent, and want to have his youngest son with him."

"If Sir Laurence wished to give me the whole place, and all within and around it, I would never set foot here until he has repaired the cruel wrong he has done my mother."

Valentine spoke fiercely, and poor Mrs. Payne was almost crying. He was longing, no doubt, to hear my news; so our good-byes were cut short, and we stood on the main road, with the gate at which we had entered behind us.

"Now, Philip," he said, "tell me all you have learned. Is it good or bad?"

"It is bad. I had better not tell you."

"You will tell me every word, Philip. That there must have been reason for suspicion as far as appearances went I know, or my father would never have acted

as he did. It is where the mistake arose I must find out."

So I told him. I told him all, and was both astonished and glad to find he was not so much affected by the news as I feared he might be. Valentine's faith in his mother was a sacred and beautiful thing.

He laughed scornfully.

"My mother, the Lady Estmere you know, standing at an open window embracing a Captain Chesham! The idea is too absurd, Philip."

"May she not have had some reason for it? They were relations, you know, and Chesham may have been very different when a young man."

"No, Philip, never—had she done so she would have known where the mistake arose and would have set things right. She never knew why my father left her—never."

"She must have heard of the duel."

“Yes, and then understood that Chesham was in some way mixed up with it. Since then she has never spoken to him.”

“Whom could Sir Laurence and Mrs. Payne have seen at the window?”

“I don’t know—whoever it was, it was not my mother, Philip,” he continued, turning to me almost fiercely. “Do you believe in my mother’s innocence—freely and unreservedly?”

“I do—freely and unreservedly,” I said, holding out my hand to him.

“It was a plot of that cur,” said Valentine; “I will wring the truth out of him some day.”

Valentine jumped at the same conclusion as Mrs. Payne, although I had not yet told him about Chesham’s concealment of Sir Laurence’s expected return. Indeed, I thought it better to say nothing about this until I had taken counsel with Lord Rothwell. If information of any kind could be

forced or extracted from Asmodeus, Valentine should be the last person to attempt to obtain it. A knock-down blow scarcely predisposes a man to open his lips and confess his crimes for the benefit of his assailant. I wondered whether upon my return to town I could bring myself to make a show of friendship towards Chesham, and reap any advantage for Valentine from any casual boast or hint I might hear whilst in conversation. That Chesham spoke freely enough about his exploits I knew, having heard him that evening at the Club. Yet even an assumed appearance of friendship with such a man would be a heavy price to pay for such a slender chance of attaining the end I desired. Any way, I had plenty of time to think the matter over. We should stay some weeks at Mirfield. . . . When I returned to London I could make my mind up how to act.

We had spent so much time at Estmere

Court that we resolved to put up for the night at the first decent inn we came to. We found the accommodation we needed at the little village we passed through, and in the morning some sort of vehicle—its friends would call it a carriage, its enemies a cart—took us the twenty remaining miles, and deposited us at our ultimate destination.

Its noble owner welcomed us heartily, and apologized laughingly for the defective accommodation of his bachelor establishment.

“I haven’t set foot in the place for two years,” he said, “although I call it my home. The rooms in this wing are habitable and fairly comfortable, but I dread to look elsewhere. I let the shooting until this year, but I did not care to have strangers in the house, so it has practically been shut up.”

Strange it seemed that two of the best houses in the country-side should for the

sake of one woman be deserted. For I knew that his early attachment to Lady Estmere had been the motive which had sent Lord Rothwell wandering through strange countries, and to which the public owed several of the pleasantest books of travel ever written.

Whatever might be the state of the rest of the large house, we had enough snug rooms for our party, which was augmented in the evening by the arrival of my old acquaintance, Mr. Stanton, and our mutual friend, Vigor. I had introduced the latter to Lord Rothwell, and they had become very friendly. Stanton I had not seen since the yachting episode. The newcomers came from London together, strangers when they started, but by some chance occupying the same carriage. Their account of their journey was most amusing, and furnished us with merriment all dinner-time.

"I hate any one in the carriage with me," began Stanton, telling us about it.

"So do I," chimed in Vigor, "I hated you like poison as soon as I saw you."

"I had just settled down, waiting for the train to start, when our energetic friend rushed in, knocking my traps about, and generally disturbing my solitude."

"He put up an infernal eye-glass, looked me up and down, sighed plaintively, and then began reading his paper," complained Vigor; "it was enough to set a man's back up."

"He bounced down on a seat, pulled out a lot of filthy-looking printed matter—proofs you call it—this he began correcting with a stumpy lead pencil, put it into an envelope, and gave it to some one to post at the next station. Then he stretched his long legs out, put his hands in his pockets, and said audibly, 'Laus Deo! my work's over for a month.'"

“He shrugged his shoulders and looked so supercilious and such an ass generally that I studied his appearance and took mental notes of it for a character in a tale I intend writing.”

“How long did this pleasant state of things go on?” asked Rothwell.

“Hours by time—hundreds of miles by distance,” chuckled Vigor. “I hated a fellow who gave himself such airs, so I persecuted him.”

“I tried to shake him off, but he stuck to me like Sinbad’s old man,” said Stanton.

“Wherever we changed,” went on Vigor, “I waited till I saw him get into a carriage—then I followed him like his shadow. He pretended to ignore my presence, but he felt it.”

“I did, indeed,” sighed Stanton, “I thought you were a reporter to a paper come down to describe a murder.”

“I thought until I saw your gun-case

you were a haughty commercial traveller, who despised second-class."

"How did it end?" I asked.

"Just about fifty miles from our journey's end, I found to my horror all my cigars were gone. I cherished the end of the last one until it burnt my lips; then I resigned myself to misery."

"Like the wise virgins, I had metaphorical oil in my figurative vessel," said Vigor.

"The beast! he had. As I threw the little glowing remnant away, he pulled out a well-stuffed case, and deliberately lit a long cigar. I said nothing."

"But he looked pathos—the mute appeal in his eyes was more than words. I passed him my case."

"He did," said Stanton; "I took it, and wondered whether I ought to offer to pay him. Grateful as I felt at his foresight in coming amply provided, I

thought I would rather pay a sovereign for that cigar than be drawn into conversation with the donor."

"If I give to a beggar, I don't expect him to be too familiar in his gratitude."

"I said, 'This is a cabbage-leaf; but cabbage-leaves are better than nothing.' Lo! the cigar my enemy gave me had known the sun of Havana."

"Then you cottoned up?" suggested Valentine.

"Not a bit of it," said Vigor. "He began to patronize me, and ask me a series of questions."

"I asked him where he was going. He told me to Ditchett Road. Then I asked what took him there. He told me, shooting. I didn't believe the beggar. 'Where's your gun?' I said. 'Haven't got one,' he answered; 'my friend has plenty, and will lend me one.' I congratulated myself that I wasn't going to

shoot with a man who doesn't own a gun of his own, and wondered who the deuce his friend was."

"He told me some wonderful tales of long shoots he had made with his friend, Lord Rothwell. They were so long that I can't repeat them."

Stanton looked rather uncomfortable.

"Then I found out where he was going," continued Vigor. "I laughed, but said nothing. You should have seen his face when I got on your dog-cart, Lord Rothwell, and he knew I was one of your guests."

"It was a dreadful shock, but I made the best of it, and am now quite resigned," said Stanton.

"We got so thick at last," said Vigor, "that we feel like old friends. He knows some one I knew; and I knew some one he knows. We cut my last cigar in two, about two miles from here. A dog-cart

makes all men equal ; so we have sworn friendship."

A merrier party never sat round a table. Valentine was quite himself again, and joining readily in the combat of wit between Stanton and Vigor. Rothwell was in good spirits, and bent on making our visit a pleasant one ; and I, what had I to trouble ? Little more than the troubles of others. I found a letter from Claudine was waiting for me when I arrived at Mirfield. She was well, and she loved me ; a year or two will soon pass away ; my father will return ; he will see her, love her, and all will be right. Now to bed and dream of Claudine, and the great bags of partridges we shall make to-morrow, for Rothwell's keepers tell him birds were never so plentiful.

CHAPTER IV.

THE HAND OF FATE.

THE next day was the "First," and we were all too busy among the turnips and stubble, wherever there was stubble, to think of anything else but partridges. We had a most successful day. Rothwell, who had shot almost every creature in the world whose destiny is to be shot for man's sport, benefit, or safety, handled his gun like a master. Stanton, who had in his time killed as many partridges as any man in England, was not far behind his host. My performances met with favourable criticism, and even the gunless Vigor added his share to the spoil. Valentine was the worst shot

of the party, or the most careless. A pretty bit of landscape would quite take his thoughts away from the duty of the day, and his inattention would expose him to the laughing taunts of his companions. But we had a successful day, and Rothwell's face beamed with pleasure as we expressed our gratification at the sport he had shown us.

During the rest for luncheon Vigor and I found ourselves together. Valentine had walked to a little distance to look with an artist's eye on an unusually attractive bit of scenery. Rothwell and Stanton were still busy with the luncheon-basket.

"Did you go to the club the last time you were in town, Philip?" asked Vigor, as we lit our cigars and stretched ourselves out for half an hour of rest and digestion.

"Only for a few minutes; I saw no one there."

"There is a most unpleasant piece of

gossip floating about with respect to our young friend," continued Vigor, nodding towards Valentine.

"What do they say about him? Has he defaulted, or gone mad, or committed forgery?"

"Nobody knows how reports of this kind begin. They fly from mouth to mouth. 'Have you heard?' says Jones; and then, delighted to find that Smith has not heard, he tells him. If Smith has heard, the two compare notes, and are convinced of the truth of it."

"Well, what is it? I'll be Smith—I haven't heard."

"Every one says that our Valentine is in reality Captain Chesham's son. How the report was started, no one can tell; but fellows talk and joke about it, and find out a marvellous likeness between the two men. Except that both are fair, I cannot see it. It's a nuisance for Valentine."

“Some reports are too ridiculous to come under the head of nuisances,” I said, feeling very vexed.

“Yes, that’s all very fine; but all the world knows that Lady Estmere and her husband live apart, and most of them know that your expensive friend Chesham’s limp was brought about by Sir Laurence’s bullet, shortly after the husband and wife separated. People take all this up, and put things together; so I am right in saying it is a nuisance for Valentine.”

“Let it be a nuisance, then. Where is Chesham now?”

“Went abroad, they tell me, some ten days ago. There has been wailing and gnashing of teeth among our friends the gamblers at the way in which he has mulcted them.”

“Look here, Vigor, I’ll tell you how the report originated. Chesham spread it for his own purposes.”

“Men don’t, as a rule, do such things as that.”

“Chesham did — he wants to annoy Estmere. He is a revengeful man, and some time back, in my own rooms, he tried to force his acquaintance on Valentine. Valentine declined it, and then Chesham insulted him.”

“Insulted him ! What did Valentine do then ?”

“Hit out like a steam-hammer, and Chesham’s head went through my side-board. Valentine is muscular, you know.”

“It must have been a great insult to make Valentine hit a cripple.”

“It was, an intolerable insult ; but Valentine was quite right.”

“Still, it’s a nuisance for him,” said Vigor, thoughtfully. “I don’t think it would make matters better if people heard about the row.”

“Not a bit. Least said, soonest mended.”

Then we resumed our guns and sallied forth on destruction bent. I was much annoyed at what Vigor had told me, and saw already this report passing from mouth to mouth was the beginning of Chesham's revenge. It could not harm Valentine much, except that it necessarily brought his mother's name into the scandal; and that, I knew, would touch him on his most sensitive part. Annoyed as I was at the matter, I gathered some comfort from the reflection that this new venomous action on the part of our Asmodeus rendered more probable the suggestion that Lady Estmere's ruin had been the outcome of some diabolical plot of his. I was now as keen on the discovery of whatever treachery might have been used as Valentine himself, and was anxious to hear of Chesham's return to town, as I felt little could be unravelled in the absence of the arch-schemer.

As soon as I found a suitable opportunity,

I told Lord Rothwell of our visit to Estmere Court, and the information I had extracted from Mrs. Payne. He listened silently, and his kind brown eyes looked full in my face as I spoke. There was a half-wondering, half-serious expression in them.

“You have told me more than Laurence ever did,” he said. “Some things grow darker, some lighter. Is there such a thing as fate, I wonder, Philip? Valentine went to Estmere Court not knowing it was his father’s house.”

“He must have known we were in the neighbourhood; but I am sure he had no idea it was the house when we entered.”

“And Valentine, and you with him, rambled over the whole place, and actually found an eye-witness to what made Sir Laurence ruin his life and his wife’s? It seems like fate. Did you see any pictures, Philip?”

“The usual array of noble ancestors.”

“None of Sir Laurence Estmere?”

“No; the good woman told me there was one by Millais in the strong-room. Valentine offered fifty pounds to be allowed to look at it. He was most anxious. Is there any way of getting the key, Lord Rothwell?”

“None that I know of, and better not. If Valentine should meet his father in the world let them be as strangers whilst this cloud is between them.”

I told him more than I had told Valentine, for I gave him Mrs. Payne’s last statement as to Chesham’s knowledge of Sir Laurence’s impending return. A look of great joy swept into his face as he heard me. I had never seen him so excited. “Fate!” he cried. “Fate! The purest, sweetest woman will be righted, if not in the eyes of the cruel world, at least in her husband’s eyes, and he will be all the world to her. And now to find the end of the coil and to trace it back to Chesham’s villainy. I am

beginning to grow superstitious, Philip, and to believe that your hand is destined to unveil the plot."

"How far do you think a gentleman may stoop for this end?" I asked.

"What do you mean?"

"I have no quarrel as yet with Chesham. He is a man who talks of the sins of his youth with cynical indifference. If I counterfeited friendship for him, and trusted to some day getting a clue from a boasting remark of his, would the end justify the means?"

Rothwell looked at me, and his eyes were full of a tenderness almost womanly. He laid his hand on my arm.

"Anything you can do with respect to Chesham, anything short of actual crime, will be justifiable. I say it distinctly. Counterfeit friendship if you can; make yourself a companion of his cups and his carouses; lose your money to him at cards—I will

pay the losses cheerfully ; win his confidence, if you can, by admiring his evil deeds. You will be justified in all by the end in view. Philip, I say again, there is fate in this.

“ Now, Philip,” he continued more quietly, “ I am going to give you a letter to read. It is from Lady Estmere. She wrote it soon after I saw her for the first time after the catastrophe, when I looked at her pure eyes, and knew that the slander was a lie—a devil’s lie—when I told her that I, for one, knew she was wronged.”

We were sitting in a small room he called a study. He rose and unlocked a despatch-box in which he kept important papers, and which went with him everywhere. He drew forth a letter and handed it to me.

“ Read it when you are alone,” he said. “ It gives, as I believe, and as you will believe, an account of all she knows of the affair. It was written to me, to give to her sons in case she died before me.”

It seemed to me such a sacred charge, this letter, that I hesitated as I took it.

“After all I am a comparative stranger,” I said. “Shall I be right in reading it? Would Lady Estmere be pleased if she knew you showed it to me?”

“I am the best judge of that,” answered Rothwell. “Take the letter; read it, and copy it if you think fit; you can return it to me to-morrow.”

I placed the letter in my pocket, and we then joined the others, who were very merry in the smoking-room at some jest of Valentine’s.

How strangely other people’s troubles enter into one’s life. Here was I, who had only known Valentine for a few months, with a letter in my pocket which he was to see only at his mother’s death. Lord Rothwell no doubt knew best, but in spite of his decided words I felt he was betraying Lady Estmere’s confidence to a stranger;

but perhaps my relation with Claudine, although disapproved by his lordship, made me as one of the family.

It was when I retired to rest that I drew my candle in front of me and sat down to read the letter Lord Rothwell had handed me. It seemed a sort of sacrilege, as I unfolded the faded paper, for it was written many years ago, and, with the exception of Rothwell, only meant to be perused by the writer's nearest and dearest after her death. It ran so:—

“MY DEAR LORD ROTHWELL,—Some day one, it may be both, of my sons will come to you as my only friend, and ask you to enlighten them as to my husband's conduct towards me, seeking, perhaps, to know whose fault it is that two lives, as far as can be seen at present, are ruined. I have thought it better to put in writing what I briefly told you the last time we met. I

can merely tell you of our parting; the reason for that parting must be told by Sir Laurence Estmere. When he bade me good-bye on the fatal morning that he left the Dower House to visit Estmere Court on business, we were, I believe, the happiest and most affectionate pair in the world. There was not a cloud between us. I went to bed that night longing for the next day to break, for I sorrowed at even such a short separation. Early in the morning he returned, and as I met him I saw a change in his face that frightened me. The moment we were alone he told me he had discovered all, had witnessed my infidelity towards him. All my entreaties, my commands even, for an explanation of his strange words and unworthy suspicions were met with bitter sneers, fresh insults, and reproaches at the duplicity he saw I displayed. I humbled myself before him. I knelt and conjured him by the love he bore me, by our children,

to let me know how I had wronged him in word, thought, or deed. May God forgive him ! He stood there with the bitter sneer on his lip, and spurned my prayers. How could a man's love, and such a love as his, have turned to hate in a few short hours ? At last my pride and the wrong I had suffered came to my aid, and my love seemed lost in the indignation I felt that he should even suspect me of faithlessness. I rose and faced him with a bearing haughty as his own. I told him that a man who believed his wife to be faithless could not wish to live with her longer, and perhaps he would now tell me his wishes and intentions for the future. 'I shall leave to-day,' he said, coldly ; 'we shall meet no more. My lawyers will in due course communicate with you.' 'And the children ?' I asked. 'The eldest boy,' he replied, with a cruel smile, 'who fortunately owns my complexion and features, will accompany me ;

the younger I disown and leave with you. We will have no open scandal; simply agree to live apart.'

"He left the room as he spoke these words, and I have never seen him since. That day he left the Dower House, taking my darling boy with him; and the next day, with my youngest child, I went to London.

"This is all I know. I do not stoop to protestations of innocence—I do not even pray that time may show Laurence how he has wronged me. Rather would I pray that he may never know it, never learn that his wife had no thought that was not centred in him. What I suffer now—what he suffers—would be as nothing to the anguish his keenly sensitive nature would feel if he learned that he had given the cruellest blow to a woman who in no way deserved it—and that woman the wife he once loved.

“Thanking you again for your kind sympathy, believe me, dear friend, yours sincerely,

“MARGARET ESTMERE.”

I read the letter again and again. I availed myself of Lord Rothwell's permission, and took a copy of it. I sat thinking of Lady Estmere and her wrongs until I worked myself up to such a pitch of indignation that I shook my fist vigorously at an imaginary Sir Laurence. Thanks to this letter and Mrs. Payne's narration, I had the facts before me as related by both the principal actors. More and more that pointed to some revengeful machination of Chesham's, and firmer and firmer grew my resolve to find out the truth. Had Chesham been in London I think I should have returned there the next day to commence operations. As it was, I must await his return. I went to bed and dreamed I was

a knight of old, and champion of Lady Estmere, just about to engage with Chesham in a deadly fray. As I was in full armour and my antagonist in plain evening dress, the result of the encounter would probably have been highly satisfactory to me if the breakfast bell had not rung so loudly and put an end to it.

I returned the letter to Rothwell, and told him that after reading it I felt no one could have a doubt upon the subject. Had I not heard what Mrs. Payne knew of the matter I should have thought Sir Laurence Estmere was a victim to monomania.

We said little more about the matter during our stay at Mirfield, which lasted until the middle of October. It was a visit I have always remembered with pleasure. The weather was fine, the sport good, and the companions entertaining. After a few days Valentine's shooting grew languid, and his colour-box and canvas took the place of

gun and cartridge. He made a number of outdoor sketches, and I began to prophesy fame and success more decidedly than I had ever done yet. Rothwell praised and encouraged his efforts. Vigor picked them to pieces as became an authority, and Stanton abused him for doing so. Valentine took praise or blame with his usual airy good temper. Save that one sorrow, there was little in life that troubled him. He laughed the loudest and oftenest of all, and he kept us up to unearthly hours with his songs and merriment; his gems and general splendour were an untiring topic of conversation and banter, and his good humour was unassailable.

Yet, in spite of all the pleasant and congenial society, no man turned his face towards London with greater delight than I did, for Claudine had written that she expected to be in London for a few days, when we might meet and renew those

everlasting vows of affection. Valentine was talking about his big picture ; so we packed our portmanteaus and gun-cases and returned to the great city, braced up by the fresh air, browned by the sun, our muscles hard as iron from the six weeks' good exercise, and altogether feeling fit to meet whatever fate might have in store for us.

CHAPTER V.

“ HERE HE COMES ! ”

I MAY pass rapidly over some eighteen months of my life, during which little has occurred to sway the destiny of myself and others of whom I write. In spite of truculent Generals, Claudine has been true to her word. She is, in my eyes, more beautiful than ever; my love for her grows and grows. Yet we have not fixed the wedding-day, although some months ago she came of age, and her guardian, with military exactness and promptitude, rendered up his account, and left her absolute mistress of something over a thousand a year. He supplemented his financial statement with

an exhortation as to adventurers in general, and fortune-hunters in particular, entreating her, by the memory of her father, to bring her ill-advised engagement with that young man named Norris to an end.

Claudine listened respectfully, and after thanking him for his care and kindness during many years, assured him that his suspicions were groundless, and that she purposed to bestow herself upon me whenever I was ready to receive her. Then, with many evil prophecies, the old gentleman washed his hands of his ward and her affairs.

She is now staying at Lady Estmere's for an indefinite time, and is half-offended that I do not wish to marry her at once. Has she not plenty of money for both? But I am proud, and cannot bring myself to live entirely upon my wife, however sweet and generous she may be. So far as I know, I am but a pensioner on my father's bounty,

and, although I feel it a piece of the greatest self-denial, am resolute as to postponing my marriage until his return. Every one who has a right to advise me applauds my determination. Each speaks glibly enough about its only being a matter of waiting some six, nine, or twelve months. Each forgets it is Claudine Neville I am waiting for ; so I do not get the credit my self-abnegation deserves. However, as I have the right to see her whenever I choose, I may manage to wait patiently until the return of the wanderer, my father.

Where is he ? It is nearly two years since he started on his travels, yet only two short letters have reached me. They are dated from some outlandish place in the Antipodes, and tell me little about his doings. He says he is improved, both in mind and body, but can as yet fix no definite time for his return. Some day, he trusts, he shall grow tired of foreign lands,

and sigh for England ; then he will return at once. He does not mention having received any letters from me. Perhaps he has shunned the beaten tracks. Certainly my father is a strange man, and my dearest hope is that this prolonged round of voyaging will cure him of some of his eccentricities. I shall not write again ; it will be but waste of time. The probabilities are that, when least expecting it, I shall get a letter or a telegram announcing his safe return. May it be soon, for Claudine is as anxious to see him as I am.

Lady Estmere too, for Claudine's and, I know, my sake, looks forward to the news of his arrival in England. I am longing to bring about a meeting between the two, feeling sure that their refined natures will find much in common. My father, I know, is of too noble a disposition to heed the world's slander. Like myself, he will read in Lady Estmere's face the absolute impos-

sibility of there being any truth in the tale.

She is the same as ever—sweet, calm, kind, yet sad withal. My friendship for her has grown into affection, an affection, I am proud to say, she returns. The day I can find Sir Laurence Estmere and hand him clear proof of his wife’s innocence will be one of the brightest in my life.

Alas ! In face of the promise I made to Lord Rothwell, and the wild Jesuitical plan I formed, how little I have been able to do towards this end ! My hope of worming something out of Chesham has not been realized. True, I have not yet had a fair chance, as the rogue has been in England only a few days since that excursion of mine to the North. I found time enough during his short stay to make a few preliminary advances. I lost a little, not much, money to him ; then he went back to the Continent. I had half a mind to

follow him, but, reconsidering the matter, decided to await his return to town. As yet this had not taken place, although I was informed he might be back before the autumn.

Lord Rothwell is also abroad. After seeing his book into a second edition he was seized by the old roaming, exploring passion, and away he went to conquer fresh lands and endure fresh hardships. We parted with a little coolness—not on his side, but on mine. I was annoyed by his exacting a fresh promise from me—not to marry Claudine until my father returned. Friends, dear friends though we were, I failed to see why he should be so anxious to take into consideration the utterly improbable idea of my father objecting to my marrying a girl who was rich, and certainly my equal by birth. That, in my position, I should be wrong in marrying without consulting my father I granted ;

but what concern was that of Rothwell's ? So, although I went down to Southampton to see him embark, I said good-bye with a coldness for which my heart smote me as I saw his kind face turned towards me, and his true, brave eyes gazing at me as I went back in the tender, and endeavoured by the warmth of my waved adieu to repair for my show of annoyance.

He has written to me several times, and in his last letter promises to be back in time for the partridges.

And Valentine Estmere ? He is not quite the Valentine of two years ago. Yet if I miss something of his airiness and gay carelessness of things in general, I know that he is in many ways improved. The irresistible charm of manner is still there, but he is more sedate, less frivolous, and altogether looking upon life as a more serious matter than he fancied it was. Valentine has had experiences. Some

pleasant, some the reverse. He has succeeded fairly well as an artist. Last year his large landscape gained admission to the Academy. It was not well hung, but, as we know, landscape painters are unkindly treated by those R.A.s who sit in judgment. However, he found a purchaser for his picture, although not until years afterwards did he or I know that the gentleman who bought and paid for it was an agent of Lord Rothwell's.

Valentine bought gems and fine raiment, and shone with greater external brilliancy than before. We laughed at his weaknesses, and perhaps loved him the more for them.

This year he had two pictures on the walls of Burlington House. One of them found a *bonâ fide* purchaser, and we all prophesied that the boy was on the high road to fame.

These were his pleasant experiences ; now for the reverse.

Do what I would to contradict it, there was no doubt but a belief existed among the men we knew that Chesham had not lied when he said Valentine was his son. Even our friend Vigor would shrug his shoulders when I tried to ridicule him out of the idea. He did not care a jot whose son Valentine was, but not knowing Lady Estmere, the slander did not to him seem so outrageous.

“ Look here, Philip,” he said, “ we know this. The husband and wife live apart. Sir Laurence shot Chesham. Cad though he is to bruit it about, most likely it is true.”

It was no good my expressing indignation at this unbelief. Fond as he was of Valentine, he would say no more. He still shrugged his shoulders.

As with Vigor, so with others. When Chesham was in London for those few days, and Valentine, who was too proud to keep out of his way, entered the room in which

he was, I could see men throwing meaning glances at one another. Once I heard a man remark to another that there was a resemblance between Valentine and Chesham which settled any doubt.

Were they alike? They were both fair men, and as Chesham was cousin several times removed to Lady Estmere, it is not extraordinary that people who looked for it could find a resemblance — but a resemblance which would never, except under the circumstances, have been noticed.

Valentine, who knew perfectly what people were saying about him, raged at the report which Chesham had spread about; but what could he do? His hands were bound. To call Chesham to account would be to rake up old scandal; to drag the name of the mother he all but worshipped into the mire. No; he must bear it in silence. I was the only one to whom he could open his heart on the subject.

This, I knew, was Chesham's revenge for the blow he had received—a revenge which he hoped would dog Valentine Estmere through life.

It was about this time that Valentine fell in love. He who had so coolly resigned Claudine to me, fell a victim to the tender passion as completely as it was my fate to do. His choice was charming enough to bear comparison with any one—Claudine, of course, excepted. She was the daughter of a man of good family—not well off, but proud as Lucifer. Nevertheless Valentine won him over, and announced his happiness to his friends. Alas! it was a short-lived bliss. A few weeks after giving his consent, Mr. Moberley, Valentine's wished-for father-in-law, wrote him that in consequence of painful facts which had come to his knowledge, he must cancel the engagement and forbid Mr. Estmere the house.

Mr. Estmere, of course, sought an explanation, and was informed that the slur upon his birth justified Mr. Moberley in the course he had adopted. For the time, Valentine was half distracted. It was true that Miss Moberley vowed to remain faithful and wait for ever and ever, but he knew she was as wax in her father's hands.

Valentine poured out his woes to me, and I knew that Chesham's malice had brought this thing about—knew it before the post brought Valentine a letter. A few lines running so :

“Even if a son strikes his father, he should ask his consent before he enters into a matrimonial engagement.”

There was a strange glitter in Estmere's blue eyes as he handed me the letter. On receipt of it he had gone in search of his enemy, but found he had left England that day.

“I shall follow and kill him,” said Valentine; “that will stop the slander.”

It needed all the influence I possessed over him to stay his steps. I had to implore him in his mother’s name; to urge upon him the utter folly of meeting the man; to show him it would make matters ten times worse. At last he acquiesced sullenly, but he was very miserable.

Not one word did he breathe to his mother of the reason for the termination of the engagement which promised so fair. He concealed his grief even from her. I alone knew how deeply he had been wounded. I alone saw him in his sad moods.

With others, even at times with me, the natural gaiety and brightness of his disposition still asserted itself. Perhaps, as Claudine said, his sweet nature was frivolous and his wounds soon healed.

Having now recapitulated the principal

events of the last eighteen months I can start my tale afresh.

One day in July—a July which made the London pavements red-hot, and those who trod them languid, and beginning to hate the sight of bricks and mortar—Valentine and I were trying to find a cool spot, and grumbling at the blazing weather.

“I sha’n’t stand it any longer,” said Valentine. “There’s nothing to wait for. The season has come to its fag end. I shall go to the sea-side to-morrow.”

Now, as it happened, for the last half-hour I had been drawing mental pictures, and imagining myself sitting in a cool cavern I knew of on the North Devon coast, and watching the fresh green waves break in lines of hissing foam against the grey crags at my feet. About a hundred yards away from where my imagination led me, I remembered a strip of firm, brown

sand, down which many and many a time I had rushed into the delicious, fresh, clear sea. I seemed to feel the sharp, keen sting of the waves as I battled my way through, and, like with Valentine, a great longing to leave the hot city was coming over me.

I answered Valentine by putting these thoughts into practical language, and commended his idea of leaving town. I was ready to go with him. Where should it be? I suggested one place after another, but could not make a happy selection. One was too fashionable, another was ugly. Above all, Valentine wanted some fine coast scenery.

“You must go to Cornwall or Devon for that,” I said.

“Why not?” cried Valentine. “I have an inspiration. Let us go down to your ancestral towers, my Philip. Let us visit the scene of your innocent boyhood, where you grew poetical, and communed with the

sea-gulls, and felt like a juvenile Alexander Selkirk."

"You will be bored, Valentine."

"Was I ever bored in my life? Write—telegraph—say we are coming to-morrow or the next day."

He was quite in earnest, and I, who had a hankering to see my strange old home again, humoured him. We went down to the lonely house, and for some ten days amused ourselves as best we could.

The place was little changed. The servants were the same, the fishermen still lived in their huts at the top of the little beach. My boyish belongings were still in their places in my old room, from the window of which I had so often gazed on the changeless, yet ever changing sea.

Yet there was one thing missing, lacking which the house could never feel like home—my father's presence. It seemed unnatural to look into the library and not

see him in his round-backed chair, bending over the large table which groaned under accumulated heaps of books and papers. It seemed strange to sit at the dinner-table without him—strange not to hear his music as twilight crept into the room. The whole place was so identified with him that I could not call it home.

Valentine and I passed the days pleasantly enough. He found some charming bits of scenery, and spent hours sketching. Often I lay beside him talking or reading. Then there was boating and fishing to occupy us. My old boat had died a natural death, but we had a bigger one sent round from Ilfracombe, and I proved to my old friends, the fishermen, that Master Philip's hand had not lost its cunning from his long sojourn in London town.

Valentine was the personal friend of every one in two days' time. Our comely old housekeeper gave him the whole history

of her early days up to the time when her man was lost at sea. She gave him also a full and particular account of my childhood's days. This I overheard through the open window as I sat in the garden splicing a fishing-rod. I do not repeat it, as the account was more flattering than I deserved. When the good, broad, musical Devonshire words came to a stop, I peeped through the window, and saw my guest sitting on Mrs. Lee's ironing-table with a great dish of raspberries at his side; his face radiant with good temper and amusement as he listened to the certainly uninteresting narration of my small exploits.

And the apple-cheeked, healthy Devonshire lass who assisted Mrs. Lee gazed at him open-mouthed, as if my brilliant friend were some gorgeous tropical bird which had strayed into this secluded spot. The cross-grained old gardener, my boyhood's terror, stuck his spade into the ground, and with-

out a frown, watched him rifle the garden of its fairest fruit, although he knew the greater portion of that booty would be distributed among the small tribe of flaxen-haired boys and girls who ran in and out of the fishermen's cottages, and came without fear to the gay young fellow's call.

So the days passed, until we began to think of returning to town; in fact, had settled to do so the next day.

Valentine was finishing a sketch—a bit of purple moorland—I was taking my last sail, for the boat was to be sent back to-morrow. When I had had enough of beating about I landed, and went back to the house. Valentine had not returned, so I started in search of him. I could not miss him, there being only one road from the moor to Torwood. I walked some way along the path, until I could see where it joined the moor. Feeling lazy, I lay down on the sweet, springy turf, waiting for

Valentine to make his appearance. "Here he comes!" I said, as I saw a figure come over the edge of level and descend the path. No, it is not Valentine. It is an older man, but enough resembling him in figure to be mistaken for him at this distance. Who is it coming down the path which can only lead to our destination? I sprang to my feet, shaded my eyes with my hand, and scarcely believing my senses, looked and looked again. Nearer and nearer he came, until I knew that I was not dreaming—that I was not mistaken. Then, fast as my limbs would take me, I ran towards the new-comer, and I am not ashamed to say that tears were in my eyes as, like a boy of twelve years old, I threw my arms round my father, and in words broken by joy welcomed him home.

CHAPTER VI.

AN UNCEREMONIOUS DISMISSAL.

AFTER my first warm, heartfelt greeting, we separated, and, still holding each other's hands, stood at some length and looked to see what change the past two years had wrought. My father looked healthier and stronger, his face was bronzed, and his figure had lost much of its habitual stoop. But the face, with its exquisite, regular features, was the same as of old, still conveying the same expression of sensitiveness and firmness. The dark eyes gazed into mine in the same mournful, but loving way. Except for his tanned cheeks, he showed no

sign of travel. His thick beard was trimmed as accurately as ever to that point which so well became his peculiar style of face. His attire was faultless, and I felt sure that, in whatever wild countries he had roamed since his departure, he was nowhere mistaken for anything but a high-bred English gentleman. I could only hope, as he looked at me, that my appearance gave him half as much satisfaction.

“You are grown—filled out—become a man, Philip,” he said. “It seems well that we should meet in the old home.”

“But what a chance!” I said. “A day later, and you would have missed me. When did you return?”

“Yesterday. I went to your rooms and heard you were down here; so I came on as quickly as possible.”

We linked our arms and walked down the path towards the house. In my delight I forgot all about Valentine.

“Where is your luggage?” I asked my father.

“The bulk in London; the little I brought with me at the farm. The coach dropped me there, so I told them to send some one across with it.”

“You walked over the moor?”

“Yes. I should have been here before, but stayed chatting to a young fellow I met—an artist. A bright, pleasant-spoken boy, whose talk amused me greatly.”

Valentine, of course. I laughed as I thought of the contrast between him and my grave father.

“Artists are not often seen in these parts,” continued my father, “so I stopped and spoke to him. In a quarter of an hour he had given me his opinions on painting, music, literature, cigars, and the habits of the people of North Devon.”

I laughed again at the idea of Valentine, delighted with a new listener, pouring out

his views in his eloquent way to a man who knew twice as much as he did on every subject under the sun.

“Did you ask his name, or where he was staying?” I inquired.

“No; but I wished afterwards I had done so. The young fellow’s manner rather won upon me. Ah, here we are at home! It seems very natural, Philip.”

We passed through the gate, and my father received the astonished welcome of the servants. He spoke to them kindly, and, still arm-in-arm, we entered the house.

I did not tell him that the young artist was his guest and my friend; I thought it would be an amusing scene when, by-and-by, Valentine, with paint-box, easel, umbrella, and other accessories, entered the house and shouted, as was his custom, for food and drink. After the favourable impression he had made, there was no doubt as to his being welcome.

We entered the library. My father threw himself into his usual chair. I sat beside him. He stretched out his hand and took mine.

“You are glad to see me back, my boy?”

My heart was too full for words. I could do little more than press his hand.

“Now then, tell me all about yourself,” he said. “How have you been getting on?”

“Rather tell me where you have been—what you have done—if you have returned quite well?”

“All that may wait, Philip. Give me your news first.” As I had always obeyed him, I obeyed him now.

“I have been reading fairly hard,” I said. “I have lived a pleasant life, thanks to your kindness. I have made many friends; I have done some foolish things, which I must confess, and entreat forgiveness.”

The thought of that large sum of money was growing very distressing now the day of reckoning came.

"Let the foolish things wait, Philip. Tell me only pleasant ones to-day."

"Then I must begin with the pleasantest of all." I felt my cheek blushing as I spoke. My father noticed my confusion, and gave me a searching glance.

"I am engaged to be married," I stammered.

The smile left his face, and the old, weary, sad look came over him. "I do not approve of marrying too young," he said, not unkindly.

"You will approve when you see my choice," I said.

"I hope so. Doubtless you have chosen wisely and well. Tell me the lady's name."

Before giving him the information I drew Claudine's likeness from my breast, and

handed it to him. He looked at it attentively.

"She is beautiful, very beautiful. That I expected, knowing your nature. Now let me hear all about her."

"She is a Miss Neville."

"A good name, but there are many branches of that family. Who are her friends?" As he spoke he again took the portrait in his hand, and looked at his future daughter-in-law.

"She is an orphan," I said. "Her father was a Colonel Neville. He has been dead some years."

"Where may you have met her?"

"At her aunt's, one of my dearest friends, Lady Estmere's." As I mentioned Lady Estmere's name, my father started from his chair. Claudine's portrait fell from his hand, and I heard the glass shiver as it struck the polished floor. He leaned over

me, and grasped my shoulder in a way which was positively painful.

“Did I hear you aright, Philip? Did you say Lady Estmere, one of your dearest friends?”

The scorn, the bitterness he threw into that last sentence, made my heart sink. Too clearly it told me that the cruel slander had reached even to him in his seclusion, that he had judged and found her guilty. I could not speak, I only bent my head in token of assent.

“Do you know who Lady Estmere is, Philip?” he continued. “Do you know that she is dishonoured among women, that her husband drove her from his side for her sin?”

“I have heard the tale. Sir Laurence Estmere must have been mad to lay such an accusation on his wife. See her, as I have seen her, and you would scout the possibility of such a thing! Some day it

will be known that she is a much-wronged woman. Some day I shall find means of proving it, then I pity the husband who condemned her !”

I spoke warmly and with conviction. Never shall I forget the look on my father's face ; the expression in his eyes. It was not sorrow—it was not anger—it was fear. He saw the astonishment written on my face, and, turning aside, walked to the window.

As I recall this scene, I wonder that the truth did not come to me like a sudden revelation. But then, it is so easy to explain things when all is clear ; and perhaps the truth was withheld from me for a higher purpose, for the working out of certain ends.

I followed my father to the window. I took his hand. It lay lifeless in mine, responding not to the clasp.

“ We cannot quarrel on the day of your

return," I pleaded. "And let Lady Estmere be all you believe, that cannot affect Miss Neville."

He turned to me. His face was pale, but composed.

"Philip," he said, "you are of age, and past my control, but, with my consent, no son of mine shall marry a woman in any way connected with Lady Estmere. My son's wife shall not come from the house of a woman who brought her husband to shame!"

Those were hard words, but I must bear them, and crush down the hot retort which rose to my lips.

"Let us postpone the discussion for to-day," I said, sorrowfully enough.

"Let us never return to it," said my father, bitterly, and sinking wearily into his chair.

I looked dreamily and listlessly out of the window; thinking of Lady Estmere,

of Claudine, of Rothwell's warning, of the contemptible nature of even the best of men, when my father, of all others, could accept such a tale as the truth. I was wondering what I should do under the present painful circumstances—wondering how I could tell my peerless Claudine what had transpired—how she would bear it. Then, as I looked up the valley, I saw a stalwart form striding towards the house. I even heard the notes of a gay song borne on the breeze, and I realized the fact that in a few minutes Valentine would be shouting and laughing in the hall. He would be under the roof of the man who condemned his mother—and that man my father!

At all cost I must prevent this. I went across to my father.

“You remember the artist you saw on the moor?” He nodded, looking surprised at the irrelevancy of my words.

“I should have told you, but I intended it to be a surprise. He has been staying with me. He is Lady Estmere’s son.”

My father’s lips worked. It was some time before he found power of speech.

“Forbid him the house,” he said.

“I can scarcely do that. He leaves to-morrow.”

“I will go to my room and stay there until he has gone.” He rose and walked to the door. On the threshold he turned.

“He is another of your dearest friends, I suppose?” he said, with a bitter sneer.

“He is my dearest friend,” I said stoutly.

“I left my boy,” said my father slowly, but in accents that thrilled me, “feeling as proud of him as ever father felt of his son. I return and find him affianced to a girl whose connections are disreputable, and hear that his dearest friend is the bastard son of a dishonoured mother.”

He passed from the room. I remained,

wondering if my father was mad, or if the Norris pedigree was such that it could not bear the shadow of a stain on its escutcheon.

Presently I roused myself and went to the gate to meet Valentine. He came in with his usual sunny smile on his face, and, tossing his artistic paraphernalia aside, threw himself on the garden-seat, whilst I considered how best to make him aware of the changed state of things.

“Philip,” he said, “you have some news to tell me, I think. The wanderer has returned?”

“Yes, my father came back just now, unexpectedly.”

“I thought so. I met him on the moor. When I saw him take the path to the house, I knew he must be your father. A very creditable specimen, I call him. I made great friends with him.”

I was silent, shrinking from the task before me.

"I am glad he's returned," continued Valentine. "Of course, you have already told him what a daughter is awaiting him? I suppose his arrival will change your plans? You won't come with me to-morrow?"

"No; I must stay here some days longer."

"Well," said Valentine, "has this unexpected event disturbed Mrs. Lee's domestic economy, or shall we get something to eat, as usual? I am famishing."

I led him into the house, where we found our usual mid-day meal in readiness. Valentine looked round, as if expecting to see his new host at the table.

"Will your father join us?" he asked. "I want to resume my discussion with him."

"The fact is, he is knocked up with his walk, and wants rest. He is not very strong, I am afraid."

"Strong! He looked strong enough as

he walked over the moor. However, it is perhaps as well he is not here at this moment. I should shock him with my appetite."

Valentine set to work gaily at the food, but I was unable to accompany him—every mouthful seemed to choke me. It was a bitter trial to be obliged to tell my dearest friend he was no longer welcome in my father's house.

"What's the matter, Philip?" asked Valentine at last, noticing the sorry part I played at table. "Has joy taken away your beautiful appetite?"

"No—not joy."

My accent expressed more than my words. He looked alarmed and surprised.

"What is wrong? Tell me, Philip."

"Everything—I think—I scarcely know how to tell you. Make the telling as easy as you can for me, Valentine."

He looked at me with an earnest

expression in his eyes—an expression few save myself knew they were capable of showing.

“Dear old boy !” he said, “speak on.”

“My father, Valentine. How can I tell you? He finds your presence under his roof objectionable.”

A sad, sweet look crossed Valentine’s face—a look the counterpart of that one which was habitual to his mother. He rose from his chair.

“I am sorry for that, Philip,” he said, quietly.

“Need I tell you my grief and mortification?” I said.

“No; I can understand them. I will not even ask you Mr. Norris’ reason, as I should not like to think more harshly than I can help of your father. Thank Mr. Norris for the hospitality I have enjoyed through you; but I can best thank him by leaving his house at once.”

“You will not go to-day?”

“My dear Philip!” said Valentine, lifting his eyebrows, and speaking in a tone which so fully expressed his astonishment at my supposing he could remain another hour in a house where he was not welcome, that I said no more to dissuade him.

“I must change my clothes, I can’t go back to civilization like this. You will send my luggage on, I dare say, and will pack up my sketches. Some are not quite dry, so be careful.”

Although the insult must have rankled in his heart, not one word of reproach did he breathe. I was his friend, and the man who insulted him was his friend’s father. Valentine loved me, so, for my sake, kept back every word which he knew must add to my vexation and shame. It was his manner on this occasion which showed me what nobility there was in his sweet and seemingly frivolous nature.

He left me to make a few preparations. I had not the heart to accompany him, but sat, wretched and dispirited, waiting for his reappearance. He soon came back, looking rather pale, but pleasant and smiling. He caught sight of my gloomy face, and laid his hand on my shoulder.

“Cheer up, Philip!” he said. “You are not accountable for your father’s—what shall I call it?—prejudice. Now call Mrs. Lee. I can’t go without saying good-bye to that worthy old soul.”

Mrs. Lee was summoned, and informed that Valentine was going. She was much distressed.

“What a pity,” she said; “and the master just returned.”

“Yes, it is a pity,” said Valentine, gravely; “but business is business, you know.”

“So it is, sir—so it is. But then, no one expects a gay young gentleman like you to have business to attend to.”

“Suppose the Prince of Wales wants me to paint him a picture?”

“That’s a different thing, of course, sir.”

“Well, good-bye, Mrs. Lee; don’t forget to send me those wonderful recipes for making all the good things I have so fully appreciated.”

He left the house with a nod and a smile, as gay, apparently, as when he entered it; but I knew that for once his gaiety was forced. I walked by his side across the garden, and happening to turn round, I saw that my father was watching from his window the departure of his guest. It may have been wrong, but I was determined to show him I was not ashamed of my friend, so I slipped my arm affectionately through Valentine’s, and so we walked together by the path towards the moor.

We said little to one another. When we

reached the farm we secured the services of a horse and vehicle. I drove Valentine to Minehead, where we parted.

“This will make no difference between us?” I asked wistfully.

Valentine looked at me rather sadly. “Not as far as friendship goes; but I am afraid it must in our intercourse. Besides, Claudine?”

I did not tell him the result of my confession to my father.

“You have told Mr. Norris of your engagement?” he asked.

“I have. I told him at once.”

“And he disapproved of it?”

“I am afraid he did.”

“For the same reason which made him object to my company?”

I bowed my head. “Oh, Valentine, my friend!” I cried. “Spare me—spare yourself. It must all come right by-and-by.”

“By-and-by is a long time, Philip. One woman we know has been waiting far more than twenty dreamy years for that by-and-by! Good-bye. I must, of course, see you in London?”

Our hands met in a true, firm grasp—the grasp of two young men who trusted and loved each other. Then we parted.

“Let things come right or stop wrong,” were Valentine’s last words. “This is only another insult for which some day I call to account that man—my father—Sir Laurence Estmere!”

As I drove slowly back to Torwood, I hoped that the father and son might never meet.

It was dark when I reached my home. I was weary, and should have gone straight to rest; but, to my surprise, I found my father in the library. He asked no question; said nothing about Valentine’s departure, nothing about my engagement.

We sat for several hours talking. He gave me a brief history of his travels. He had seen many lands and many people, and his description of his wandering, as he gave it in his own well-chosen, eloquent language, interested and held me, in spite of my troubles and the feeling that he had treated me harshly and unjustly. Indeed, sitting once more with my father, in the old room in the old house, with all things that I remembered as a boy around me, hearing once more the lash of the breakers on the rock, it was as much as I could do to restrain myself from nestling close to his side, placing my hand in his, and believing I was a boy again.

At last we rose to retire for the night. It seemed to me as well that all my unpleasant revelations should be crowded into one day.

“I wish to tell you of a piece of folly of mine.”

“We have had enough for one day, Philip.”

“I would rather get it over, if you are not too tired.”

He sank back into his chair wearily.

“Just after you left,” I said, “I was foolish enough to lose a large sum of money at cards.”

I thought he looked relieved as he heard my confession.

“Gambling is a bad habit,” he said. “I trust you broke yourself of it?”

“Yes, I think so ; but I lost a large sum.”

“Mr. Grace paid it, I hope. It is not owing now?”

“Yes, Mr. Grace paid it at once. But I am ashamed to say how much it was. It was over three thousand pounds. Will you ever forgive my folly?”

“My dear Philip,” said my father, rising, “in the face of other things you have

to-day told me, the loss of a little money is not worth considering. Good night."

I went to bed wondering whether my father was mad, or whether he was a millionaire.

CHAPTER VII.

"CHOOSE BETWEEN THE TWO."

FOR two days I stayed on at Torwood without entering upon the debatable ground with my father. I felt sure that when we next discussed the affair a crisis in my life would be at hand. Not for one moment did I contemplate the idea of resigning my future happiness because my father objected to my choice. Much as I loved him, I knew that there were bounds to the duty a son owed to his father—that there are situations in which a man is justified in disregarding parental authority. He had showed me no valid reason for his objection to my marriage with Claudine.

If the world laid sin at Lady Estmere's door, it was the refinement of cruelty to visit it upon her niece. If I had ever believed Lord Rothwell's implied supposition that my father would object to the alliance, I felt sure that all opposition must vanish when he saw the girl. Now this hope was at an end. He had confessed her beautiful; he had nothing to say against her; it was simply her relationship to Lady Estmere which made her obnoxious to him. I sighed deeply as I thought of what might be the result when next I broached the subject to my father.

I was grieved to see that upon his return he at once fell into the old groove of life. So easily did he pick up every dropped thread, that he might have been away for a day in the next county, instead of having made a journey of many thousands of miles. The very morning after his return he resumed a scientific paper at the point he

left it when he started. He spent his hours with his books as of old, he took his walks in the same listless way as ever. I could see no change, or prospect of a change, in his manner of life.

During the first two days I was nerving myself for the struggle which I knew must take place. I dare not delay it any longer. Whatever Valentine might tell his mother, she would at least know my father had returned. She and Claudine would be expecting news most likely, expecting I should bring him to them. What would they say when they knew the truth—knew that he forbade the marriage, and knew or guessed why he did so?

I lay awake at night for hours thinking over my position, and the more I thought, the stronger grew the sad truth that the time was at hand when I must choose between the woman I loved and my father.

The suspense was growing unbearable. Although we met in the most friendly way, I felt there was something between my father and myself, something that changed the old loving relations. I hoped that he would speak, but he showed no inclination to approach the subject, so with a heavy heart I was fain to commence the attack.

It was a glorious summer evening; the sun was already so low that its rays were endurable. My father and I had dined together, and, after lingering a few minutes over our wine, had, by mutual consent, risen from the table and walked out of the house. We strolled slowly to the top of the great tor, and, as we rested there, I thought of the day when I took my first step into the outside world; thought of that moment when I passed in the steamer the old house, and borrowed the captain's binocular to look at the tall, dark figure standing on the summit of the hill, until

the tears which sprang to my eyes blurred the glasses, and for a while rendered them useless. I remembered how that first parting stirred all the passion in my boyish nature, how I blamed and condemned myself for even wishing to leave my father. How I wept as I thought of his loneliness. And now, a few years later, I was compelled to exercise a man's prerogative, and for the sake of the woman I loved rebel against his commands.

Perhaps my silence told my father what was in my mind. He looked at me inquiringly. I think he had made two or three remarks on the beauty of the sunset—remarks which had fallen unheeded on my ears. At last I turned to him.

"I hope you have reconsidered the matter I spoke to you about on the day of your return?"

"It has never left my thoughts a minute," he said, sadly and quietly.

“Surely,” I said, “you will withdraw your prohibition. Leaving my happiness out of the question, what would you wish more in my wife? She is beautiful, good, well born, and, if such a recommendation were needed, rich.”

“I have spoken, Philip; I have no more to say.”

“Then I am to understand that because she is the niece of a woman whose husband left her in a fit of mad jealousy, you think she is unfit to be your daughter. Oh, my father! think again. Remember that I love her. Think what your decision must mean!”

I took his hand, but he kept his eyes turned from me. His face was pale, but the hard, firm look was settling on his mouth. I knew that my entreaties were unavailing.

“I have thought,” he said, “and my answer is the same.”

"You forbid it absolutely?"

"I forbid it. Stay! I am going beyond my rights. You are a man, and I know mean to please yourself. You have the right to do so. You may marry Miss Neville to-morrow. I cannot prevent you."

"How can I marry her whilst I am dependent on you? I will not live on her money. I must wait until I can make an income."

"It is not a matter of money, Philip. That, thank God, will never come between us. Whether you marry against my wish or not, your income will be assured."

"How can I take it when I displease you?"

"You need not trouble about that. There is money you are justly entitled to. I will not have you swerve a hair's-breadth from your course for a mercenary consideration. But, Philip—"

He paused, and looked me full in the

face with a yearning look in his eyes. "From the day you marry Miss Neville, Lady Estmere's niece, you and I will be strangers. The father and the son who have loved and borne with each other for years will be parted. This is the only threat I hold out, the only deterring influence I use."

My eyes were full of tears. That he was treating me harshly and cruelly I knew; but I loved him, and life without his love would be wretched; and then I loved Claudine. As I guessed it would be, I was called to choose between the two.

For many years I had known the uselessness of appealing against any determination my father had formed, but this time I implored and besought him to withdraw his words. He was adamant. He spoke kindly, as one pitying both himself and me, even, I thought, as if we were the victims of circumstances, not

of his most unprecedented prejudice, pride, or whatever it was. At last, sullenly and sadly I turned away. He followed me and took my arm.

"Philip," he said, "we will not again speak of this. Let all things between us be on the old footing until you write to me and say that Miss Neville is your wife. Then all will be over between us. I have had great disappointments in life, and must bear one more. Now the sun has set, let us go home."

I remained a few days longer at Torwood ; but the subject was not mentioned, except once. I was most anxious to learn if it was my father's intention to emerge from his seclusion ; if he had returned to England to bury himself once more in that lonely house, with no companions save his books ; or at last to step out into the busy world and take that place which his talents and bearing rightly gave him. I asked him

the question, and expressed the hope that the latter might be his determination. He looked at me wistfully.

“It was my intention to do as you wish,” he said; “but since my return I have changed my mind.”

I knew his meaning.

“You have changed it on my account,” I said.

“I shall stay here for a time at least,” he said, ignoring my question.

For the first time in my life I was inclined to speak bitter words to him. His meaning was that, returning and hearing my news, he had changed his plan of life. But I said nothing, although I felt that he was treating me with great injustice. I had little hope, if he once more settled down to the life of a recluse, that he would ever be induced to leave it.

Yet in everything else he was kindness itself to me. He showed me a letter he

had written to Mr. Grace, saying that the amplest means were to be placed at my disposal, and that he purposed transferring a large sum of money to me absolutely. His heavy luggage was sent from London, and, when he unpacked the boxes, I found that in every land he had thought of me, and carried away some memento of each. He brought me back quite a large collection of quaint and interesting articles, many of which were of great artistic beauty and of considerable value ; some, indeed, he must have had much trouble in obtaining. How was it that, willing to lavish time and money on my unworthy self, he could find the heart to deny me my life's crowning happiness ?

With many a question like this in my mind I left him to return to town, where another painful task lay before me—that of telling Claudine and Lady Estmere what had occurred, or as much as I could tell.

Of course I had written to Claudine and hinted that things were not going quite so smoothly as I wished, and of course Valentine had told Lady Estmere something, so I went to the studio to see my friend before I called at the house. Valentine was working away at a large canvas, on which was the bold outline of rocks and crags well known to me. He welcomed me with a frank smile of pleasure, which told me that he in no way visited his unceremonious dismissal on my head.

"Well," he said, "how did you leave my old friend, Mrs. Lee, and—I suppose I may ask for him—your father?"

"My father is incomprehensible," I said.
"Tell me what your mother says."

"She is vexed, of course."

"Not more than vexed?"

"Well, wounded—but you see, Philip, she is used to trouble, and does not wear her heart on her sleeve."

Valentine's bright blue eyes grew very soft as he spoke of his mother.

"Go and see her, Philip," he said.

"I am going at once. Tell me about Claudine."

"I don't think Claudine will take kindly to her father-in-law; I can't say more."

"But she does not blame me?"

"Blame you! You didn't choose your father!"

"You have told her he objects?"

"I haven't, but I suspect my mother has. I have no secrets from her, you know."

Then I went across to Lady Estmere's house. She was at home. Claudine was not, but would return soon.

I could not help feeling that there was a little change in Lady Estmere's manner towards me. This may have been but fancy, but if the difference was there it wore off in a very short time, and her

words and manners were sweet and kind as ever. I sat beside her, but for a few moments did not speak.

“Your father has returned, then?” she said.

“Yes; but his return has not made me so happy as I expected.”

“Few of our expectations of happiness are fully realized,” said Lady Estmere. There was a pause in the conversation. I knew she was waiting for what I had to communicate to her.

“My father, I have told you, is a strange man,” I began.

“From your account of him I have been compelled to think so.”

“Yes, he is a strange man; has lived a strange life for many years. He cannot, it seems to me, view things like other people. He is now cruel and unjust to me.”

“Speak gently, Philip, he is your father.”

“He has taken some strange prejudice to

my marriage with Claudine. In fact, dear Lady Estmere, he absolutely declines to receive her as a daughter."

Lady Estmere looked at me. There was no anger in her eyes, nothing but sympathy. She did not even ask me what reason my father gave for his extraordinary conduct.

"What will you do?" she asked.

"Do! I can only do one thing. I must marry Claudine, and trust to time to change him!"

"Yet it is a fearful thing disobeying a father."

"It is; but a son has his rights as well as a father. He cannot be called upon to sacrifice his happiness for a whim! Surely you must agree with me in this?"

"I do not know. I cannot advise you. You are a man, and can take your own path. Yet, do nothing rashly. Somehow, Philip, no marriages seem completely happy

when a parent's approval is missing. 'This may be an old world fancy of mine, but I cannot get rid of it.'

Before I could reply the door opened. "Well, Sir Truant," said a voice that thrilled my heart, and in a second Claudine was in my arms. Lady Estmere left the room as we embraced.

I spare the reader the delight of our meeting. Only as my lips met Claudine's, as I clasped her supple form, as I saw her glad face glowing with health and beauty, I knew that I could not resign her love, even though its price must be a father's affection. Our greetings over, we sat down, side by side, to talk.

"Philip," she said, "you are looking ill and troubled. Tell me everything."

"It is sorry news."

"I guessed that. Tell me of your father."

"He is mad, dearest, I believe. He must be mad!"

"He disapproves of your choice? Answer me, my love. I can bear it."

"He does," I said, with my cheeks flushing. "But again I say, he's mad!"

"Now, tell me the reason. I am a lady; I do not come empty-handed; you love me—and, to you at least, my lord, I am not without charms."

I snatched a brief reprieve by answering her last remarks in a suitable way; but her face was grave.

"Valentine did not ask you the reason. Lady Estmere did not ask you; but I must know, Philip!"

"He knows Lady Estmere's history," I faltered.

"No, Philip," said Claudine, rising like a queen, and positively stamping her foot on the ground, "not her history! What the world says is her history, he may know. Your father is a coward!"

I felt I could not contradict her. How

glorious she looked in her anger! She stood erect, the small head thrown proudly back, the dark eyes glowing, and the delicate nostrils slightly quivering. It was well for Philip Norris that it was not his fault which had raised this emotion.

“A coward!” she continued. “He condemns because the world condemns—because slander has been at work he slanders. You have called him noble and good. I say again, he is a coward.”

“Yet he is my father, Claudine,” I said, gravely.

She knew that her words were cutting me to the heart. She looked at me, and her whole appearance changed. Tears sprang into her eyes, and she hid her head upon my shoulder.

“My love! My love!” she cried. “I am wrong. Forgive me, Philip.”

I kissed her again and again, until she smiled through her tears; but, even as I

did so, I thought sadly of the lonely man who loved me, yet assured me that my marriage with Claudine would separate us for ever.

Then I began to speak of our marriage. I could see no reason for postponing it. I knew that nothing I could say would change my father's decision. Perhaps, after Claudine was my wife, I might again appeal to his love, and for once in his life he might yield—might, at last, take Claudine to his heart and love her. So I pressed her to fix a day in the late autumn. She consented.

"There is no reason why we should wait," she said, sweetly. "We have enough to live upon in a quiet way. Take me, my love, when you will."

Glad to find an opportunity of saying anything in my father's favour, I told her of his princely generosity, so far as money was concerned. She grew troubled.

“Philip,” she said softly, “I cannot share that man’s money with you.”

“It is my father’s gift, dearest.”

“Yes; but he forbids your marriage. Philip, I love you, but I am proud. All that I have is yours, unreservedly. You must choose between us. If you take my gifts, you must refuse his.”

“I cannot live on my wife——”

“Yet you would on the father who spurns your wife! Your pride leads you in the wrong direction, my Philip.”

I combated her resolution, but my efforts were but feeble ones. In my heart I knew she was right. As matters stood, there was more degradation in accepting benefits from my father than from the woman for whose sake I resigned them.

“Dearest love,” said Claudine, at last, “if you are too proud to use what is mine, let us wait a year, or even two years. Then you may see your way to making your own

fortune. Then, if you wish, you may take the little I have to offer. But we cannot be in any way dependent on the father you must give up for me!"

So we settled it, although I felt I was making a great sacrifice. To give up a year, or perhaps two years, of married life with Claudine, was an unprecedented offering on the altar of proper pride.

One thing might shorten the probation. Let me find the means of proving Lady Estmere's innocence; let me bring her wretched husband to her feet, craving pardon for the wrong he had done her, and then, even my father's far-fetched objections must fall to the ground, and I should enter into possession of my kingdom. This was the thought which filled my mind when, after having bidden Claudine adieu, I walked to my chambers. How strange it was that Lady Estmere's sorrow should now become, as it were, part of my life;

that my own happiness urged me to get at the bottom of whatever devilish plot Chesham had devised ! I remembered Lord Rothwell's words, that the hand of fate was at work, and, as matters now stood, I felt inclined to agree with them.

The more so as, when entering my room, I found a letter in his big, bold handwriting. He had returned to England and would be at his old quarters to-morrow, where he hoped to see me.

And more and more so, as that night I walked into the smoking-room of the Club, and found Captain Chesham talking for the benefit of a few kindred spirits, with all his old satanic cynicism and disregard for what most men hold pure and holy.

CHAPTER VIII.

FAILURE.

I FOUND Lord Rothwell the next morning standing in the doorway of his hotel, smoking his long cigar, and watching with an air of keen relish the passers to and fro, many of whom glanced up at the tall, bearded man in the old shooting-coat, and doubtless wondered who and what he was. To me, in my present troubled state, that great broad-shouldered, tender-hearted man, who smiled welcome with grave eyes, seemed like a rock of refuge. To him, at least, I could turn for counsel, and I wanted a counsellor. Dear as Valentine was to me, I could not discuss with him the point

on which my father and I were at variance ; with Lady Estmere the same reasons prevented my doing so ; and Claudine had settled everything according to her own lights. So I was unfeignedly glad when Lord Rothwell's large brown hand clasped mine, and in its clasp told me I was still his friend.

"Come in, Captain Philip," he said—he still occasionally called me by the old boyish name he had given me. "Come in, and have a long talk."

He led me to a room which he had already begun to transform to his taste. The two huge tables were installed, and even now getting covered with odds and ends. I laughed as I looked at the room.

"You soon make your mark in a place," I said.

"Yes ; I wonder they allow it. It's because I'm a lord, I suppose. There's a great advantage in having a title, if you

know how to use it. People talk about the obligations of rank. Don't believe them, Philip. If there's one man can live to please himself it's a lord. I dare say you are ashamed of me sometimes."

He was maligning himself. Although, to suit his own notions of ease, he chose to lounge about in an old coat, to sit in one of those comfortable round-backed wooden chairs which he had doubtless bribed a waiter to steal from the kitchen, Lord Rothwell, save with his most intimate friends, looked and acted as much like a nobleman as the most exacting in such matters could demand, whilst his courtesy, courage, and chivalry raised him in my eyes above any nobleman I had as yet met with.

He had not yet seen Valentine or Lady Estmere. His first inquiries were for them. He was pleased to hear that Valentine was making himself known as an artist, and

was much vexed when he heard of his ill-starred love affair, which had ended so prematurely. Then he asked me about my own engagement.

I told him everything—told him of my father's sudden return; of Valentine's unceremonious dismissal; of the choice I was called upon to make between my father and Claudine. His face grew very grave as he listened.

"I feared it from the first," he said, with a sigh. "You remember my words?"

"Why should you have feared it? To me it is inexplicable?"

"Perhaps it was a presentiment. Perhaps I know the world too well. You will not be rash, I hope, Philip?"

"I shall marry Claudine, if that is being rash. Not yet," I added, seeing disapproval written on his face.

"No, not yet. Wait awhile. Is there any chance of your father coming to town?"

"I am afraid not." Then a thought struck me.

"Lord Rothwell," I said, "would you do me a very great favour, if I asked it?"

He turned his eyes to me; those eyes that somehow often, in spite of his strong, manly features, seemed to me like the eyes of a woman.

"I would do much for your father's son, Philip," he said.

"My father's son!" I repeated. "My father is a stranger to you; you have only seen him once, years ago."

"Your father's son is yourself," he said, rather quickly. "What can I do for you?"

I felt almost ashamed at putting my request in words.

"I scarcely like to ask you," I said; "but if you could find the time, and could run down to Devonshire and see him, you could argue with him, could tell him what

Claudine is, what Lady Estmere is. He would listen to you. Words from a man of your age and standing would influence him far more than anything I could say. He might see the injustice he is committing."

Lord Rothwell made no immediate reply. He sat as one in deep thought, yet not as if offended by my request. He stretched the hand out and took another cigar, while I sat awaiting his decision.

"Yes," he said, "I will go. I don't think I can do any good; but I will go. I will start to-night."

"I don't know how to thank you enough. Please don't inconvenience yourself—any day will do."

"I will go at once. I hate having anything hanging over me."

"Shall I come with you?"

"No, better not."

"I suppose he will see you," I said, rather

doubtfully, thinking of his discourteous treatment of Valentine.

“Mr. Norris is a gentleman. There is no reason why he should refuse to see me. If he should do so I can come back as I went. Now let us talk of something else.”

True to his word, Lord Rothwell started that night for the West, and I waited with great anxiety to learn the result of his kindly errand. My hopes rose. I knew he would do all he could to change my father's mind. Surely his arguments—the arguments of a man of the same age as my father—a man of the world, than whom none knew better what was due to the honour of a family, must at last prevail. So I argued and hoped.

I was much surprised to find, upon inquiry, morning after morning at his hotel, that Lord Rothwell had not returned. Indeed, more than a week passed before I again saw him. As the days went by I

expected a letter, but none came; so when I at last stood in his presence I was in utter ignorance as to his success or failure. He did not keep me long in doubt.

“As I expected, I have failed, Philip,” he said.

“There is no hope of his relenting?”

“None; on this one point he is determined. His is an obstinate character.”

Somehow I felt a greater indignation at Lord Rothwell’s failure than at my own.

“He knows that I can be equally firm,” I said, passionately; “knows that by his own free will he is casting me off for ever; knows that I will marry Claudine.”

“Yes; he knows and expects it.”

“Tell me all he said.”

“What use, Philip? I argued and combated with him, but not an inch did he move. To repeat his words would be to cause you pain. The case is hopeless.”

“Will he keep his threat, do you think?”

"Yes, Philip," said Lord Rothwell, "he will keep it. Think well, my boy, of what you are about to do."

"I have thought. I have decided," I said. "There is nothing more to say, except to thank you for your great kindness. You were well received, I hope?"

"Save on this one point, Mr. Norris and I got on admirably. My prolonged stay answers for that."

"You liked him?"

"I more than liked him. What talents, what learning, to be buried like his are buried! It is piteous, Philip. It is not life. If I waste my time on unworthy objects, at least I live."

"But, knowing Lady Estmere as you do, how could you have stayed with him?"

"I can make allowances for men. And, in spite of all, your father loves you. This made me more kindly disposed towards him."

“In his way, I suppose, he loves me ; but he shows it strangely !”

“Make no mistake. He loves you as much as ever a father loved a son. If I blame him, I can still say to you, think well what you are doing.”

“You would not ask me to give up Claudine ?”

“No, I dare not do that now. But, I say again, work night and day, body and soul, to learn what was the mistake which made Laurence Estmere leave his wife. I told you it was your task to do this. Spare neither time nor money ! I am rather disappointed you have as yet done nothing. You are now being punished for your dilatoriness. Go and do your work.”

“I have had no chance of doing anything.”

“The chance will come. Chance ! It is not chance ; it is fate ! Go and do your work.”

I marvelled at the passion in his words.

I resolved if he was a fatalist, and, moreover, why his superstition should have led him to believe that I was deputed to clear the name of the woman he loved. Right or wrong, I would obey him, for my interests were now identical with Lady Estmere's.

So it was that, in a fortnight's time, men who knew Philip Norris shrugged their shoulders and predicted that he was going to the bad as fast as man could go. Was he not hand-in-glove with that clever, cold-blooded gambler, Chesham, who had plucked and ruined many a young fellow before?

CHAPTER IX.

A GAME OF PIQUET.

THE next two months of my life I would willingly obliterate from my memory. Even now I wonder whether the society in which they were passed has not made me take a lower and more debased view of the world, a view which I trust will in time fade away entirely. I was touching pitch, yet striving to keep myself from being defiled. Now, in whatever way you bring yourself in contact with pitch, some of it will stick. I can only hope that the stains will some day wear off.

The pitch I handled was Captain Richard Chesham, and a blacker kind was never

manufactured, and as to compass my ends I had not only to handle this villainous substance, but to pretend that I liked doing so, my task was a highly unpleasant one. Many and many a time I felt almost sick at the filthy mass I was endeavouring to make run into one particular mould.

But distasteful as I found it, I did my work thoroughly. At the cost of a little money and a great deal of self-respect, I found myself in a very short time the chosen companion and comrade of Asmodeus. We dined together, supped together, sometimes breakfasted together. Where he went I went, so regularly that he might, had he chosen, have discarded that stick of his in favour of its substitute, myself.

Such a strange intimacy was bound to be remarked and commented upon; my best friends shook their heads, and those who had the right to do so remonstrated. Vigor was the first of these.

"What the deuce is the meaning of your friendship with that old rogue, Chesham?" he asked me.

"You don't like him, then?"

"Like him, Philip; I am ashamed of you! There are some men from whom decent men and women shrink as from snakes."

"Snakes, they say, have powers of fascination."

"For cowards and the lower natures. But you fear nothing, certainly not the world's opinion, or you would not call that reptile your friend."

"Gently! I have not called him my friend."

"But you are with him all day long. You gamble with him, you listen to his blasphemies of women, you even echo them. I have overheard you."

"You listen also with interest when he talks."

“I listen with wonder, and marvel that such creatures live, marvel more that they can find supporters like Philip Norris.

“Why is it?” he continued. “Perhaps you are going after the money you lost to him two years ago.”

“No one likes to give up such a large sum without an attempt to get it back,” I said, feeling glad that Vigor had suggested an explanation.

“He will ruin you, Philip. It is monstrous to me how hot-headed youngsters can imagine they can match in his own trade a man of his age, of his skill—one who has lived for years on what he has swindled fools like you out of.”

“You use hard words, Vigor.”

“I apologize—you are not a fool. Yet if you are sanguine enough to play with him and expect to win, why are you his friend? There is no need for that; you might kick

the man down-stairs every morning, yet if your money were to be won, he would play with you every evening."

Knowing more of Chesham's revengeful nature than Vigor did, I doubted the truth of this assertion.

"I tell you what, Philip," he said after a short pause, and finding I made no reply, "I'm not going to see one of my best friends go to the devil in Chesham's company. I have heard of you, and where you have been seen together. I shall go and speak to Rothwell about it. He has some influence over you."

To this I made no objection, and I have no doubt but Vigor was as good as his word.

Among other remonstrances came one from Stanton. This rather amused me, for, with all his many good qualities, Stanton was not a man in whose path a younger man might follow with credit.

“I say, Captain Philip,” he said one day, shaking his head ominously, “this sort of thing won’t do, you know.”

“What sort of thing?”

“Here, it’s only the other day you were an innocent boy, picking up whelks and sea-anemones in Devonshire; blushing if a woman spoke to you, and not knowing hearts from diamonds; now you’re about with the biggest uncut rep in town. Won’t do, Captain Philip.”

“I suppose while you and others speak to a man I can do so.”

“He’s a bad lot, Philip; of course we speak to people, but we don’t crony. Wonder what Valentine would say to your new friend?”

“Valentine doesn’t choose my friends.”

“Much better if he did, if Chesham’s a specimen of your unbiassed selection. Valentine is an ass in lots of things, but knows how to choose his friends. I shall speak to

Rothwell ; he hates Chesham and loves you like a son."

How little he thought that it was only Lord Rothwell's assurance that I might do all save crime to worm the truth out of Chesham made me steadfast in the task I had undertaken, and careless as to what common report said!

Rothwell said nothing to me. Once or twice I attempted to tell him how I was progressing, but he waived the matter aside. "Come to me if you want money, not unless," he said. "I will not interfere. The affair has passed from my hands, and from my guidance. You are working out your destiny, Philip, and must do it alone."

His words sounded superstitious and wild, but I attributed them to his great and lifelong love for Lady Estmere. For him, the world might fall if her welfare were secured by such a catastrophe.

Destiny or not, how did my work prosper?

I found no difficulty in resuming Chesham's acquaintance. As soon as I showed him I was willing to recommence gambling he was at my call, and making himself as pleasant as it was possible. A hundred or two lost to him, an expressed wish to have my revenge no doubt opened vistas leading to wealth. The readiness with which I had settled his former claim told him I was a pigeon well worth plucking. He little dreamt he was handling a pigeon which one day would turn and rend the hawk.

We played cards together as often as it suited my purpose. Strange to say, I suffered very little in pocket by our bouts. Now that I had no wish to win, luck was frequently on my side. It was when the cards were put away that my true game began.

A sickening game ! To win the confidence of a man like this, I was obliged to make him believe I was a kindred spirit. To sit

and listen to recitals of past exploits—ay, even to applaud them. When I look back upon that man as he revealed himself to me, I wonder if the world could show his equal in wickedness.

A man without mercy—without a suspicion of a high thought. To him nothing was sacred. An avowed atheist, not from honest conviction, but choice; and what is even rarer, an utter disbeliever in the existence of good in man or woman—a man who deliberately turned to evil, and said, “Be thou my good.”

Virtue and chastity in women, honour and truth in men, he jeered at. To him each man, each woman had a price. A sensualist who gloried in his victories over trusting women, who detailed the arts by which he had brought about the ruin of each with as much gusto as I have known Rothwell display when describing how he outwitted and at last slew some monarch

of the forest. To me this man was the devil incarnate ; I could scarcely believe that once he had dared to love Lady Estmere ; that once he had been called friend by her and her cruel husband ; or that the latter had wrecked his life and his wife's life through jealousy of such a wretch as Richard Chesham.

I cannot describe my life, or assumed life, during the time I enjoyed his intimacy, the places he led me to, the people I met, when he fancied he had satisfied himself that I was a man after his own heart. It was well for me Valentine was away sketching—that Lady Estmere and Claudine were at a friend's in the country. I should have blushed with shame had I been compelled to meet Claudine's pure eyes. The contamination of the scenes I had witnessed would have kept me from her presence.

Chesham boasted—no, I am wrong in saying boasted—he related his successes

with women as if the topic was one of interest and nothing more. Moral feeling he had none. He must have been born without it, as at times a man is born without a leg or an arm. He related all his exploits to me as an old veteran might relate his deeds of arms to a young recruit, but as yet he had not mentioned Lady Estmere's name—I dared not put the question direct, although once or twice I had tried to lead up to it. He seemed to avoid it—perhaps he feared my friendship for Valentine.

One night Chesham was in my rooms, to which, carrying out my scheme, I often invited him. We had played *écarté* until I professed myself tired of the game. I was a loser to some extent, so had a right to propose a cessation. We sat talking.

Let me say here that when he talked of other subjects than his exploits, the man was well worth listening to. He knew every

country in Europe, and had gone through strange adventures in most of them. He could tell tale after tale, relate experience after experience. All his anecdotes were underlaid with bitter cynicism, but again I say that at such times, if I could have forgotten my purpose and his true nature, he would have been an entertaining, if not an elevating companion.

“I suppose,” I said, “you never stooped to the weakness of really loving a woman?”

A bitter smile curved his lips and I saw his teeth close.

“Yes,” he said. “Once, only once, I was fool enough to do so.”

“You never married?”

“Once I would have done even that. The woman I loved married some one else.”

“And lived happily, of course?”

“She threw me over, and I swore to be revenged. By ——, I had revenge.”

“The usual sort?”

“The usual sort as you call it. The wife hasn’t spoken to her husband for more than twenty years.”

I knew I had touched the right chord; but I registered a vow that if ever Chesham were at my mercy I would not lift a finger to save him.

“Who might she have been?” I asked lightly, for Chesham made no secret of names. He said nothing for a while, but drained his glass. I replenished it. It was part of my scheme to take what advantages I could from him when liquor was in the ascendant, but as yet I had met with no success. Drink did not loosen his tongue as a rule.

But the night was warm, and he had drank freely. He may not have been quite himself.

“Who was she?” he muttered, as if to himself. “The proudest and purest of women—so every one said. Yet now people

shrug their shoulders and smile. Oh yes, I had plenty of revenge."

I should have liked to have taken him by the throat, and, if possible, have shaken the truth out of him. I noticed he placed his hand on his hip as if in pain.

"Is your leg bad?" I asked.

"Curse him. It's always bad when I speak of her. He thought he had his revenge when I fell; but what was his to mine? What a fool he was! What a fool!"

How should I lead him on? I was trembling with excitement.

"Who was a fool? Sir Laurence Estmere?" I asked.

"Sir Laurence Tomfool! Lord bigger fool! I can see them now. By Jove, they meant to kill me!"

"You fired in the air, I suppose?"

"I covered his heart to an inch, but the cursed pistol shot crooked. Never mind, I have had my revenge."

Could I get nothing more out of him ? I determined to try a bold stroke.

“ But how did you make such a fool of Sir Laurence ? How did you make him believe his wife was fond of you ? ”

He looked at me half-dazed, then, by an effort recovered his straying senses. He passed his hand over his eyes and rose from his chair.

“ Your whiskey’s very strong, my boy ; I shall be talking nonsense if I take any more. Good-night.”

He hobbled down the stairs, and with a feeling of great disappointment I closed the door behind him.

But from his own lips I had learnt that Lady Estmere was, as I suspected, the victim of some diabolical vengeful plot of his, and I determined to redouble my efforts ; to spare no means of finding how the plot had been laid.

I went again and again over Mrs. Payne's tale. She who loved and would have screened her mistress, and saw her, as Sir Laurence saw her, standing at the open window with Chesham's arms round her. Granted that Chesham wished to work out his revenge ; that he knew of Sir Laurence's expected return—how could he have brought that situation about ?

The only tenable theory was that he had a partner in his guilt ; that some one at his instigation had personated Lady Estmere. But who ?

There was a lady's-maid. What became of her ? Could she throw any light upon the subject ? I resolved, if I could find out nothing more from Chesham, to run down to Derbyshire, and see Mrs. Payne once more. To get from her the name of every servant who was in the Dower House at the time, and trace one and all, and hear what

each had to say. As for Chesham, I believed him capable of any villainy that the heart of man could devise.

It was now nearly the end of August. Besides my long-standing engagement with Rothwell I had several other invitations for September. I declined all, being determined that so long as Chesham stayed in town I would keep with him. A man doomed to walk with a thick stick cannot do much with a gun among the turnips and stubble. As yet he gave no sign of quitting London, and his movements controlled my own.

Valentine came back to town for a few days. He called on me, but I was out. Afterwards I met him as I was walking down Piccadilly. Chesham was leaning on my arm at the time, and smiling his evillest smile as he looked at some fair woman who was near us. Valentine, as soon as he saw my companion, started as if shot. He passed me without taking the slightest

notice. This was no more than I expected, and I rejoiced to think that as Chesham saw the non-recognition he would believe our friendship was a thing of the past. He chuckled, and looked after Valentine's retreating figure.

"Your dear friend Estmere didn't notice you," he said.

"We are not such friends as we used to be."

"But you ought to love him for my sake," he said, with a malignant expression in his eyes. "Do you remember how he struck me in your rooms?"

"Yes—very well."

"I've paid off some of that score, and mean to pay off more. Confounded young upstart!"

I did not defend Valentine. It would have suited my purpose better to have abused him, but I could not bring myself to do that.

"It's hot," said Chesham, "the pave-

ments are like fire. Let us go to the club and have a quiet turn at piquet or *écarté*."

I made no objection, and in a few moments we were in the card-room.

"The whole place seems deserted," said my companion. "Hang me, if I don't think we are the last men in town. I shall go abroad again—to Monaco, I think."

"Let me know when you think of going. Perhaps I will go with you."

"I wish you would, and have a shot at the tables. I'm not fond of young fellows as a rule; but I like you, Norris. That's more than I've said to any man for years."

Curious as it may seem, I believed him. I had noticed many little things lately, which showed me that so far as he was capable of liking any one he was beginning to like me. He was not so keen about winning my money. Once or twice he had told me roughly that I was a fool to play with him. He one day made me a present

of a cigar-case—an act of munificence no one would have believed possible from him. If the man had a soft place in his heart I felt sure I was finding it. I was playing my part almost too well. It was a just retribution that the man who as yet had never made a friend should choose at last one who was stimulating friendship for the sake of destroying him.

We played two or three games at piquet. Luck went against me, and I lost twenty pounds. I handed him a bank-note of that amount, and having no wish to play longer, put the cards aside. Just then a waiter entered, and Chesham sent him to see if there were any letters for him.

There was one addressed, I noticed, in a woman's handwriting. This was nothing unusual, as many such notes came to this Don Juan. He opened his letter, read it, and muttered one or two of his pleasantest curses.

“Bad news ?” I asked.

“No ; only an application for money. That’s the worst of any folly, it always costs money. Long after you’ve forgotten it, it jumps up and duns you.”

“I thought you never paid any money for your follies ?”

“Never, if I can help it. Begad ! folly or not, I’ve paid through the nose for this.” He hobbled across the room, rang the bell, and asked for an envelope and ink. Then he drew out of his note-case the very note for twenty pounds which I had just paid him. He tore the fly-sheet off the letter, wrapped it round the note, and placed it in the envelope. This he directed and stamped, and then placed it in his pocket.

I had paid little attention to him. I made no attempt to ascertain the name of the correspondent who could extort such considerable black-mail from so experienced a villain as Richard Chesham. It was no

concern of mine. All I knew was that the note he had so lightly come by had been used to pay the tribute money, and as far as that went he was welcome to it.

“I’m going to Tattersall’s to see what the Leger betting is. I laid the odds against Serpent, and want to hedge. Will you come?”

I declined, pleading another engagement. The truth was, Valentine’s look lay heavy on my mind. I wanted to see him, and, although I could not explain matters, to ask him to suspend his judgment for a while.

So Asmodeus limped off alone, little thinking what that rubber of piquet was going to cost him.

I stood at the door of the club thinking where I should go to look for Valentine. Whether to his mother’s, or to my rooms and wait there on the chance of his calling. I decided on the latter course, and was just stepping into the street, when a waiter

accosted me. He had a crumpled piece of paper in his hand.

“Did you drop this, sir?” he asked.

I took the letter, and, as every one else would, glanced at its contents to ascertain. I laid claim to it. It bore no address—no signature. It was in a woman’s writing, and comprised but two lines. So short, indeed, that had I wished to avoid perusing it, I could not have done so, as I took it all in at one glance.

“Send the money or L. E. shall know all; I swear he shall.”

I knew it was the letter that Chesham had torn, and my heart leapt as it told me for whose name those initials stood. I felt that Chesham was delivered into my hands. The very way by which I should hunt him down stood clear before me.

For a second I thought of keeping the letter, but decided against so doing. Asmodeus would miss it, and would doubtless

return to find it. His suspicions would be aroused if he learnt that it had reached my hands. Besides, I did not want it, or not enough to run any risk by retaining it. Every word it contained was burnt into my brain, and as the writer's name and address were wanting it was of no further use ; so I returned it to the waiter.

“It belongs to Captain Chesham. Put it in an envelope and give it to him when next he is here.”

I walked at the top of my speed to Albemarle Street, threw myself into a chair, and began to think how to turn the circumstance to account. I breathed the freer as I thought that my distasteful task of simulating friendship with a man I scorned was coming to an end.

Accident had given me the clue, but had I not stooped to associate with the man I should not have been in his society when

the chance occurred. That I should fail after this never entered my head—that those initials stood for Laurence Estmere was to me a matter of certainty—that I should find the writer and wring the truth from her was a natural sequence.

I was in a state of delighted excitement when Valentine was announced. In my moment of triumph I had almost forgotten the cut direct he bestowed on me just now, and ran forward to greet him. Seeing him stand with his right hand fixed unmovably in the breast of his coat was like a shock of cold water to me.

“Will you not shake hands, old fellow?” I said.

“I will not. I did not intend to come here, until I thought it was mean to sneak away without telling you what I intend doing.”

“Well, sit down, don’t stand up in that tragical way.”

“Can’t you see I am not joking, Philip Norris? I believe you are bewitched!”

“I was never in fuller possession of my senses.”

“Yet you ask me to take your hand. You who so far forget what is due to your friend and your friend’s mother—even to the girl you love.”

“I forget nothing, Valentine.”

“You do, I say. No one, not even you, who calls Chesham his friend, shall be a friend of mine. Philip, I could not believe my eyes, I could not believe my ears, when people told me.”

His voice at the commencement had been almost fierce, but as he spoke the last words it sank to regret and tenderness, whilst his eyes glistened.

“Valentine,” I said, “you will not throw old friendship aside for this?”

“I must and will do so. If you can explain, do so. I will entreat your pardon.”

“If I cannot explain?”

“Then good-bye. I lose my best friend.”

“But you forget your mother and Claudine.”

“My mother, much as it will cost her, will follow my example. Claudine I have no right to speak about.”

I paused. Should I tell him with what object I had sought Chesham? How full of promise that intimacy had proved? Curiously enough, Lord Rothwell's superstition, that I was destined to carry this matter to the end without aid, by now had taken full possession of me. Besides, I might fail after all—if so, why raise false hopes? I determined for a time to remain under a cloud in Valentine's eyes.

“Valentine,” I said, “we have been true friends. Will you do me a favour?”

He nodded.

“When do you go away again—and for how long?”

“To-morrow, for a couple of months, I expect.”

“Will you until your return try and suspend your judgment? Will you think till then that you may have been too hasty? Will you say nothing about this intimacy which troubles you to Lady Estmere or to Claudine?”

“You ask a great deal, Philip.”

“No matter; do it for me. Promise and give me your hand on it.”

He held out his hand. I grasped it heartily. Then without another word he turned and left me.

Perhaps, after all, it was as well. Any show of friendship between him and me would make Chesham mistrustful, and my great object still was to lull him into fancied security.

As soon as Valentine had departed, I resumed my former train of thought. My first steps needed no hesitation. That

morning I had been to my banker's and drawn out two hundred pounds—a fifty, five twenty-pound-notes, and the rest in smaller paper—one of these twenty-pound-notes I had given Chesham.

I looked at the numbers of those left in my pocket-book. These notes were brand new, and numbered consecutively. I had taken the note from the top, so was able to determine its number. I had but to give this to a person whose business it is to make confidential inquiries, and sooner or later it would be traced back from the Bank of England to the person who received it from Chesham.

I lost no time in setting the matter afoot, but I had to wait a few days for the information. The note had passed through very few hands. It reached the Bank of England from another London Bank—it had been paid into that bank by a large firm of wholesale grocers. It had come to them

in two halves from a retail grocer and general dealer at the little town of Surbury, and he had changed it for a Mrs. Merton, whose name was on the back of it. As my agent was instructed not to inquire before a certain date, and as the day on which Mr. Jones, the retail grocer, changed it for Mrs. Merton was the day after Chesham had posted it, there was no need to alarm her by asking her from whom it came—that I knew well enough.

Mrs. Merton lived at Acacia Villa, Surbury. I noted the address, paid and dismissed my agent, and then started for Surbury to finish the inquiry myself.

That game of piquet was going to cost Richard Chesham dear.

CHAPTER X.

MRS. PAYNE TAKES A JOURNEY.

No one—no young man, at any rate—would think of settling down to stay for an indefinite time in Surbury, unless some powerful incentive urged him to do so. The dreaminess and monotony which petty provincial towns present to strangers is proverbial, and I found that Surbury quite justified the commonly-received idea. I have no wish to insult the worthy inhabitants who live, trade, and perhaps enjoy life there ; but for my part I should prefer the solitude of the desert to the little interests of such a place as Surbury.

It was an old town ; indeed, such towns

cannot be new. In the present age there would be no reason to call such a place into life. Having existed to supply a want of old times before railways were dreamt of, it still struggles on, trying to justify itself for having been built. Every census is pointed to with pride as showing a small increase in its population, and the inhabitants are pleased to think that at the present rate of progression, if the world should last another two thousand years, Surbury may be a city of some importance.

It boasts an old grey cathedral, far too big for its present requirements, but which vouches for its respectability, as an old family coach too cumbrous to use now-a-days might vouch for the respectability of a decayed family. Besides the cathedral, there are churches and chapels of a more recent date, and moreover the ruins of an old castle. Add to these one or two small cloth manufactories, the usual long street of

shops, a few old-fashioned inns, a certain number of private houses, and you have Surbury complete.

Yet, although it is hard to imagine people living in such a town unless forced to do so, there are a few who come from a distance to reside there. These are mostly out of business people with small means and large families of boys. They come to Surbury, take a house and live in it for a certain number of years; then shake the dust of dulness from their feet and seek fresh quarters. The secret of this temporary attractiveness is this:—

Many years ago a rich man bequeathed his fortune towards founding and endowing a grammar school. On various subsequent occasions other philanthropists augmented the gift. The property bequeathed in course of time grew greatly in value, and for many years Surbury School has been one of the richest in the kingdom, and can afford to

give the sons of its inhabitants a first-class education for merely nominal fees. It is this bait which tempts fresh people to come to the place—a cheap and good education for their sons, with the chance of gaining one of the many scholarships which are the prizes at the end of their career.

Of course, like all little towns, and above all, little cathedral towns, Surbury was divided and subdivided into cliques. The great county clique of magnates who lived on their estates round about need not be counted. To them Surbury was a convenience, and that was all the notice they took of it except at election times, for it still returned one member. In the town proper, at the head of all the cliques was the cathedral clique, with the dean, canons, and precentors. Touching the fringe of this, perhaps sometimes merging into it, was the school clique. The dean and his subordinates were rather afraid of some members of this.

There were a few clever men among them, who, not being in orders, were ungagged by the Thirty-nine Articles. Then came the professional clique, lawyers, doctors, and a couple of bank managers. This clique admitted good clients, patients, and depositors into its bosom, so long as they were not actively engaged in retail trade. The small manufacturers claimed right of access here. Then came the superior tradesmen's clique and the inferior tradesmen's clique. How the division was settled none could say. The only thing certain was that the butcher, the fishmonger, and the greengrocer were not quite on a par with the linen-draper, the chemist, and the jeweller. As they settled the laws of precedence among themselves, the reason of that settlement is the business of none outside.

In a word, the little town was eminently dull, respectable, and orthodox. The last place in the world, one would think, in

which to try and trace back the threads of a fiendish scheme like Chesham's.

It was the first week in September when I went down to Surbury. I put up whilst I was inspecting the ground at one of the old-fashioned inns, the Mitre it was called. Then I began my search after Mrs. Merton.

I made no direct inquiries. The gossip I heard the first evening, when for want of something better to do I smoked a cigar in the bar-parlour of the inn, told me that if I gave the slightest inkling of my business to a soul it would be over the town in a few hours. I must, I knew, fight entirely on my own hand. I had the woman's address, so the morning after my arrival I sallied forth in search of her abode.

I found it easily enough—a small semi-detached villa on the outskirts of the town. I had not yet fathomed the little mysteries of Surbury, or I should have known that the greater number of these houses were

occupied by those persons who were called by the townspeople casuals—those I have spoken of as sojourning in Surbury for the advantages offered by the Grammar School. The houses were small, and it spoke badly for Surbury that several were untenanted. The one directly opposite Acacia Villa was to let furnished.

Nothing could have been more opportune. My mind was at once made up. I returned to the town, found the house-agent, and by twelve o'clock was the accepted tenant of that eligible residence, suitable for a small family, Rose Villa, North Road.

The agent asked for references; merely as a matter of form, he said. I paid three months rent in advance, which suited him just as well as if the dean and the whole chapter had vouched for my respectability. It was only when the contract was in black and white I remembered I had not even looked over my new house; but that was of no

consequence, except that it made the house-agent look on me as an eccentric character.

Eccentric or not, I could not set up housekeeping without a servant, so I inquired if Surbury possessed a registry office, and having found one and made my wants known, in the afternoon became the proprietor of a stout, middle-aged female, who would condescend to act for the time as a general servant. She was old and ugly enough to set any breath of slander at defiance.

I arranged to enter into possession of my new abode in two days' time. Before doing so I returned to town, and packed up enough books and other things to make my new life enduring. Then on the morning of the appointed day I received the keys of the house, and proceeded to instal myself.

The whole of that day was consumed in getting the place ship-shape and in order. My stay might be a long or a short one,

that depended upon Mrs. Merton ; any way it was as well to make myself as comfortable as possible. There was not much to complain of in the house and its fittings. Allowing for the exaggeration indispensable to his business, the house-agent had not treated me unfairly.

Although the back room of the house was the pleasantest, looking out over green fields, and commanding a view of the fine old cathedral towers, it was the front room I decided upon making my dwelling-place. I re-arranged the furniture, placed a large table close to the window ; I bought a blind which I could see through without being seen. I covered my table with books and papers, so that I should be able to sit, to all appearance, hard at work, but the while keeping a strict watch on the opposite house.

I had not formed the slightest plan of action. To tell the truth I was certain in my own mind that whatever success I met with

would be the result of accident. Accident had revealed to me the existence of Mrs. Merton and her connection with Chesham. Accident, I knew, would at last show me the way to learn what I wanted to learn. Sooner or later the opportunity would come. As Rothwell said, the hand of fate was at work. Still, I trusted that I should not be compelled to remain many months in Surbury.

Understanding the necessity of giving some reason for a young man like myself taking a house and living in it in solitary grandeur, in such an unattractive place, I endeavoured to forestall the gossip of my neighbours by telling my servant that I was to be kept entirely free from interruption, as I was engaged in writing a book. To carry out this occupation successfully I told her that quiet was indispensable; it was for this reason I had come to reside for a few months at Surbury. I have not

the least doubt but the next day my next door neighbour's servants and my opposite neighbour's servants knew all about my business, and were reconciled to such a phenomenon as a young man taking a house in the quiet shades of North Road.

Now, I am pleased to think that a man who is known to be writing a book is an object of some veneration and awe to a certain number of his fellow creatures. The amount of steady manual labour such an effort entails, the labour of writing such thousands of consecutive words, is enough to command a certain amount of respect for the author's perseverance, leaving the intellectual value, if any, of the work out of the question. Whether the subject be historical or philosophical, tragic or comic; whether the author is engaged on novel or guide-book—even cookery-book, his pursuit surrounds him with a little glamour, and permits him to be eccentric in his actions.

Although most literary men who do any good work as regularly and methodically as clocks or chronometers, the public is pleased to think otherwise, and to credit them with peculiar and unbusiness-like habits.

So I could not have given a better reason for my appearance in Surbury. It left me free to follow my own devices, choose my hours for going out and coming in; and, moreover, to tell the truth, it was not altogether a false statement. I had for a long time been meditating throwing my thoughts and imaginative faculties on to foolscap, but as I commenced this history by saying, I little guessed that the first work of mine which would see the light would be the story of my own life.

Let my reason for occupying that seat at the table in the window be false or sham, the morning after my arrival I was there, and commenced my inspection of the opposite house. My breakfast things were

cleared away, and by the aid of a good cigar, I settled down patiently to my self-imposed task. Of course, at present, this was simply to ascertain who the inmates of the house were, and what they were like.

The first person I saw emerge was a boy of about fifteen. He came out with a cricket-bat on his shoulder, and went down the road whistling gaily. Half an hour afterwards a tall, slim girl, quietly dressed, came out. She carried a roll of music, and as she was scarcely old enough to be a teacher, I presumed she was on her way to receive a lesson. After her departure the door opened many times, but only responsive to the summons of peripatetic vendors of fruit and vegetables, or of butchers', bakers', and other tradesmen's boys. At last when I grew almost tired of watching, a woman came to the window just opposite me, and stood there for some minutes. I felt certain that I was

looking at the mysterious Mrs. Merton herself.

She threw open the window and began watering a box of plants which stood on the ledge, so there was nothing to obstruct my view of her, and by the aid of an opera-glass I was enabled to make a thorough study of her personal appearance.

She was between forty and fifty years of age ; dark-eyed, dark-haired, and of medium height. Her face was pale and wan, but I felt sure that at one time she had possessed a considerable share of good looks, although her face now was not a pleasant one to look at. She was quietly and respectably dressed in plain black, and from her exterior there was nothing to determine what station in life she filled. Any way, I felt sure she was Mrs. Merton, and therefore watched her attentively.

Presently she leaned out of the window and looked down the road, and a sudden

transformation seemed to take place in her features. She became positively good-looking. A smile lit her face and brightened her dark eyes. I followed the direction of her eyes, and saw that the boy and girl were returning, walking side by side. As they ran hastily up the little strip of garden, Mrs. Merton left the window and opened the door to them. The caresses she welcomed them with left no doubt in my mind as to their relationship being that of mother and children.

Now, having seen Mrs. Merton, and what manner of woman she was, it behoved me to find out something about her history ; and the only person I could question about this with safety was the servant I had engaged.

Fortunately she was no stranger to the little town—no stranger even to North Road. She had lived with a family close by, so had all the gossip of the place at her finger-ends. There was nothing peculiar in

a new-comer like myself wishing to know something about his neighbours, and my servant was only too eager to oblige me with all the information she possessed.

It was of no interest to me to hear that on one side of me lived a Mr. Bell, a consumptive gentleman, who coughed in a heartrending manner, and must die before the year was out; that on the other side lived a Dissenting parson, who was so poor that one joint of meat a week was all he could afford; that a little higher up the road, at a larger house, lived a colonel, very haughty and rich—why he should live in such a place is a mystery I have never troubled to solve. It did not vex me to hear that Mrs. Smith, next door but two, washed at home and disgraced the neighbourhood by using the back garden for a drying-ground; nor was I properly shocked at the sad news that Mr. Davis drank and beat his wife. It was when the

current of gossip made for the opposite bank that my attention was aroused.

Yes, my domestic knew all about the people opposite. Mrs. Merton lived there, with her son and daughter. She was one of those who came to Surbury to reap the benefits of those handsome bequests to the Grammar School. She was a widow, or, said my informant, with meaning in her voice, supposed to be one. Any way, she didn't wear a cap as a proper widow should. She was not rich, but pretty well off; at least the servant there, a respectable young woman and friend of her own, didn't grumble much about cheeseparing. Still, there was something about Mrs. Merton. The fact was, no one knew anything about her, that was the worst that could be said.

And what worse could be said? In a town like Surbury, people must know everything about their neighbours, or they are

sure to credit them with all sorts of evil doing.

“Were they quiet people, or did they keep company?” I asked.

Very quiet, my gossip averred. In fact, the respectable young person, her friend, found her health and spirits suffering from the monotonous existence—a monotony, which, by the bye, I had noticed she endeavoured to relieve by ogling the butcher’s and baker’s boys, &c. Unless Master Merton brought one of his school friends in, no one entered the house from New Year’s Day to December the 31st. The young miss was going to be a governess or a music mistress, so the deponent was sure that Mrs. Merton could not be quite the lady.

After extracting this information a day or two passed without my making any progress in my researches. I felt I was doing no good sitting at my window and watching for the rare occasions when Mrs.

Merton went out of doors. I must find whether any link in her early life fitted into Lady Estmere's, and to ascertain this I must know something about her antecedents. Who she was before she appeared in Surbury, whether her present respectability was the growth of later years: in a word, her early history.

Casting about which way to proceed, I thought of the housekeeper at Estmere Court, Mrs. Payne. I felt sure that she would do all she could to aid me, so resolved to go to Derbyshire and persuade her to return with me to Surbury. If Mrs. Merton were in any way connected with the Estmere family, Mrs. Payne would surely recognize her. So having no one to consult, I started the next day for the North.

Estmere Court looked dreary and deserted as when Valentine and I visited it two years ago. Neither Sir Laurence nor his eldest son had been near it. In my heart I doubted whether that eldest son

was alive. I could not understand a man never seeking his mother. To me, who for years and years had longed for a mother's love, such an absence of filial affection seemed inexplicable. Nor could I understand a young man allowing this splendid place to go to rack and ruin. His father might have unpleasant associations connected with Estmere Court, but surely the son must hope some day to play an important part in his native country. The only explanation I could suggest for the young man's silence and absence was that he must be dead, and his heartless father had never made known the fact to his wife. If so, as such a property as this was certain to be entailed, some day Valentine must succeed to the title and the estates. Yet I knew he would value them nothing whilst the terrible fact remained that his father denied his right to the name of Estmere.

Mrs. Payne remembered me and made

me welcome. Her husband was with her now, and in spite of the fear she had expressed of incurring his displeasure, by allowing us to go over the house, I found him one of those honest, dull, thick-headed men, who, to their own great advantage, are completely ruled by their wives. Mrs. Payne asked affectionately after Lady Estmere and that bonny young gentleman, Mr. Valentine.

“He sent the gown he promised me,” she said. “It was a beauty. Far too good to wear. I haven’t even had it made up yet, sir.”

“Keep it until Sir Laurence and his wife come back to Estmere Court,” I said.

“If I keep it for that, I’d better give it away to my niece, Polly, who is going to be married next month and hankers after it like.”

“Don’t do anything of the kind, Mrs. Payne. Lay it by in lavender until I

find out all the vile plot and show Sir Laurence his frightful mistake."

"You're joking, sir," said Mrs. Payne.

"I was never further from joking. I have come two hundred miles to see you solely for this reason, and to-morrow I want you to go back with me."

She saw I was speaking in earnest. No doubt she had been wondering why I had made my appearance at Estmere Court.

"I would go two hundred or two thousand miles, if it would do her ladyship any good. Oh, what a sweet young woman she was! My heart aches as I think of her."

"Very well. You be ready to start to-morrow as soon as possible. I can't tell you all, but I believe I shall trace out the whole of Captain Chesham's villainy.

"Your husband won't mind your leaving him," I added, remembering there was such a person as Mr. Payne.

"Not he, sir. John, my man, I'm

going a journey to-morrow with this gentleman. I shall be back—when shall I be back, sir?”

“In two days, at the outside three.”

“All right, my lass,” said John. “If you says you be right in going, why, right you be.”

So the matter was settled.

As Estmere Court was a long way from any decent hotel accommodation, I was obliged to accept Mrs. Payne’s kind offer of finding me a bed for the night. I did not like the idea of making use of Sir Laurence Estmere’s house; but, after all, the worthy housekeeper and her husband were certainly in a position which would permit them to ask a friend to stay with them, so I calmed my conscience by looking upon myself as their guest, and in no way taking hospitality from their absentee master.

I spent several hours that afternoon wandering through the large deserted

rooms and again inspecting Valentine's ancestors. I must own to a feeling of annoyance as I contrasted my own position with his. There were no pictures of stately men and fair ladies which I could look upon and say, "These are my forbears." Of my mother's family I knew nothing; indeed I had long ago made up my mind it was a humble one. But it was strange that my father never spoke of his own relatives. Leaving his ample means out of the question, I felt sure he had come from a good stock. His manner and his education were sufficient to vouch for the position his own people had held. Yet, so far as I knew, with him began the history of my family.

I am bound to confess that, if only for the sake of showing Claudine that my lineage was equal to her own, I wished it was otherwise, and, as I walked between those lines of dead and buried Estmeres,

I resolved that when next I saw my father I would tell him that the time was come when I had a right to know something of my family history ; but, all the same, I knew that unless it suited him to enlighten me I should still be left in ignorance.

When I, at last, grew tired of the company of Valentine's ancestors, I went out of doors, and accompanied Mr. Payne, or as I should rather call him, Mrs. Payne's husband, walked round the neglected gardens, and heard a great deal about the past glories of the Estmeres and their present possessions. My informant reckoned that the estates were worth at least twenty thousand a-year, and had heard that an immense sum of money had been saved during all the years which Sir Laurence had spent in wandering abroad. The agent and the London lawyer managed everything. They might know where the master was, but no one

else ever heard a word from him. It would be a good day for the whole country side when he threw Estmere Court open once more. Several rich people had wanted to rent it, but so far as John Payne understood, Sir Laurence was too proud to let his house although he did not care to live in it himself. He had never even let the Dower House ; since Lady Estmere left, it had been occupied only by a caretaker.

The next morning Mrs. Payne and I started on our journey. John borrowed a light cart and drove us to the nearest railway-station. The parting between the husband and wife was quite affecting, she might have been going to Australia instead of to Somersetshire. Indeed, in spite of my promise to see that she lacked nothing, he insisted upon his wife encumbering herself with edibles enough to have lasted, with proper management, to the equator. No doubt he thought I was rather young to

be trusted with such a precious possession as his buxom wife ; for he gave his “ lass,” as he called her, many cautions as to taking care of herself, and being on the look-out for pickpockets. Although she received his warnings with a certain air of condescension, it was easy to see she was somewhat appalled by the immensity of the journey before her. This is not to be wondered at, as I believe until now she had never crossed the border of her native county.

The train cut short adieus and warnings, and sped us away to the south. We reached Surbury late at night. I could not have timed it better. I was able to take Mrs. Payne to my house without observation by the neighbours. I had ordered a room to be kept in readiness for an unexpected visitor, and other creature comforts prepared ; so that Mrs. Payne was able to retire to rest, not feeling so bad as she expected to feel after such a journey.

We breakfasted together the next morning, and then adjourned to my study. My guest had not yet asked me what I required of her. She was a good soul, quite content to do what she was asked to do without seeking for an object. I placed her in my chair in front of the window.

“Have you eyesight, Mrs. Payne?” I asked.

“Sharp as needles, sir; ne’er a member of my family ever wore glasses until after sixty.”

“Well, you’re a long way off sixty. I want you to look at the opposite house, and when you see a lady come out or look out of window, try if you can recall her face.”

“Have I seen her before, sir?”

“I can’t tell; I want to know that. You haven’t seen her for many years—more than twenty, certainly.”

“Twenty years plays tricks with faces

and with memories, sir," said Mrs. Payne with a sigh.

"I shouldn't think you had changed much. Country air preserves good looks, you know."

Mrs. Payne laughed. No woman is too old to like a compliment. She fixed her eyes on the house opposite, and waited Mrs. Merton's appearance. By-and-by she seemed to grow tired of watching, and glanced round my room and frowned.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"The dust, sir; I can't abide dust. That servant of yours is an idle hussy, I'll be bound."

"You shall talk to her presently about it. Now look at the other house. Ah, there she is!"

Mrs. Merton, according to her custom, was standing at her window, watering her geraniums.

Mrs. Payne looked long and earnestly at

her. She rose from her seat and approached the window, evidently wishing to look over the blind. I pulled her back.

“Don’t show yourself. Go as close to the window as you like, but keep below the blind.”

I wheeled the table out of the way. She knelt down and peered through the interstices of the blind.

“Do you know her?” I asked eagerly.

“Yes, I know her. I remember her face; but I can’t think where I saw her, or what her name is.”

“Look again, and try.”

I was kneeling by her side. Presently Mrs. Merton turned to speak to some one inside the room, and in so doing presented her profile to us.

“Ah!” said Mrs. Payne, with a sigh of relief. “Now I know. Dearie me! dearie me! how twenty years can change a body! No wonder I didn’t know her.”

“Who is she? Don’t make any mistake. Don’t tell me unless you are quite certain. A great, a very great deal depends on it.”

“Oh, I’m quite certain now,” said she, moving from the window as if fully satisfied. “I can’t think how I could have been so stupid.”

“Well, who is she?”

“That’s Mary Williams, Lady Estmere’s maid as was.”

CHAPTER XI.

ON THE RIGHT TRACK.

THE plot thickened. The identification of Mrs. Merton and Mary Williams, the maid who had been in Lady Estmere's service when the catastrophe took place, removed any fear that I was not upon the right track. The only question was how to follow that track to its proper end.

The first thing to be done was to get rid of Mrs. Payne. If she saw her, my opposite neighbour would most assuredly recognize her old fellow-servant, and the suspicion her presence would arouse must defeat my ends. So I kept my guest a strict prisoner for the rest of the day.

I don't suppose she found the confinement very irksome, as she employed the time in going over my house, and pointing out for the benefit of my servant all evidences of neglect and uncleanness. No doubt she visited their sins of omission very heavily, for as soon as her back was turned, I was informed that if that lady was going to be mistress there I had better seek another servant. I suppose her tormentor's speedy departure made my domestic reconsider her determination, for I heard no more about her going, although I was often reminded of Mrs. Payne's disgust when a cloud of dust arose as I displaced any article.

By the first train the next morning, before neighbours were astir, I sent Mrs. Payne back to her John. I wished to reward her for her trouble, but she utterly refused to hear of such a thing. It would be a proud day for her if anything she

had done would benefit her old mistress and Master Valentine. I put her in charge of the guard, who promised at Bristol to see her into a through carriage for the North, and am glad to say she accomplished her journey safely.

Now for Mrs. Merton. How was I to get that confession from her? Should I attempt to force, cajole, or bribe her to tell the truth? I shrunk from the last-named course, thinking that evidence given for a pecuniary consideration would always bear a certain venal taint about it. In whatever way the confederates may have tricked Sir Laurence Estmere, it would be well that nothing should damage the testimony of the one who confessed to it.

There were three methods of appeal—to the woman's fears; to her right feelings, if she had any; and lastly, to her cupidity. The last method I put aside as one only to be used in extremities. Before I could

decide which of the others to adopt, it was absolutely necessary I should know something of Mrs. Merton's character. I must establish myself on a footing of friendship with her.

I began operations through the school-boy. Acquaintance with a lad like this is easily made. A few remarks about the noble game of cricket ; a morning's practice together with bat and ball ; an invitation to see my books and other few belongings, and we were like old friends.

He was a bright, clever boy ; as quick and ready, it seemed to me, at his books as at his sports. His society was no infliction on me ; although, had he been the dullest oaf in the world, I should still have sought it, in order to fulfil my mission. Yet, for a while, I gathered nothing by it, except that I established a bowing acquaintance with Mrs. Merton, and that her daughter looked rather conscious, and

as if she wished I would speak as I passed her.

One morning I met Charley Merton in the road. He looked rather sulky and downcast ; so I asked him what was amiss.

“Mother’s been scolding me. She says I ought to fag at Latin and Greek during the holidays. She is going to get some one to coach me.”

“Well, that’s all right ; you oughtn’t to complain !”

“I know I oughtn’t,” said the boy, penitently. “But it seems a jolly shame to have to ‘swot’ in this fine weather.”

I laughed as I heard the old school word for “working.” “Your mother wants you to get up in the school, I suppose,” I said.

The boy blushed. “The truth is, Mr. Norris,” he said, “we are so precious poor that mother says if I don’t get a scholarship some day I shall have to be an errand-boy, or something of that sort.”

An idea struck me. I saw a way of establishing friendly relations with my opposite neighbour.

“Would you like me to come and coach you, Charley?”

“You, Mr. Norris? Why, you’re a gentleman.”

“Don’t you want a gentleman?”

“Yes,” stammered the boy. “But we want some poor sort of a chap, who won’t mind small pay.”

“I don’t mind small pay. I shall see your mother about it. Come in with me now.”

The boy preceded me, looking timid and puzzled. He showed me into a sitting-room, then went in search of his mother.

In a few minutes she appeared, and bade me a stiff and rather embarrassed good morning.

“I dare say your boy has told you why I have called,” I said.

“He told me something, but I could scarcely understand him.”

“I hear you want a tutor for him. I have come to offer my services.”

She hesitated. “You are a stranger,” she said.

“Yes, to you ; but not to Latin and Greek. I took a high degree at Oxford. I am quite competent to teach a lad.”

“But I can afford to pay so little.”

“Never mind that, Mrs. Merton. Money need not enter into the discussion. I have taken an interest in the boy ; so, unless you positively object to the arrangement, I shall consider it settled.”

She said no more, except by way of thanks ; so the next morning I went across the road and began playing my new part of a tutor to youth.

The ice being broken between Mrs. Merton and myself, it was not long before I made opportunities for closer intercourse. Indeed,

before a week was out, I was spending the evening at the opposite house, and that evening was the first of many.

What kind of a woman did I find my neighbour? Of course, she was not a lady, although in the course of her career she had picked up enough to enable her to pass muster fairly well. There was something about the woman to dislike—nothing, except her passionate devotion to her children, to like. Whatever may have been her life since she left Lady Estmere, that life was wrapped up in her son and daughter. It was because I praised, truthfully enough, the boy's talents, that she admitted me into her friendship. So far as I could sum the woman up she was a vain, somewhat bad-tempered creature, fearful, I am sure, that her low origin would be discovered.

She told me, when, after a while, she began to be confidential to me, that her late husband was a lawyer, who died young, and

left her with two children, and very little to rear them on. Whether she spoke the truth—whether she was ever married—is a thing I have not yet discovered, and having no interest in the discovery, shall not try to make it. She seemed rather curious to know something about myself, and, having no object in concealment, I told her exactly where I came from, and the little I knew about my family. I was amused to find, from several little tokens, that her minute inquiries had been made, because she had imbibed the, perhaps not unnatural, idea that her daughter's charms had induced me to introduce myself to her family circle.

The girl was a nice, quiet, well-behaved young woman, who played and sang very sweetly, but my heart was proof against all attractions, and Mrs. Merton must soon have been convinced that she had made a mistake in attributing my visits to her daughter's charms.

Then, I fancy, a spice of the old lady's-maid vanity and coquetry made her wonder if it could be possible I came for her own sake. After all, she was not an old woman, and retained many traces of good looks. I must soon have undeceived her, and left her to fall back upon my interest in Charley, as an explanation for my visits.

Perhaps Mrs. Merton wished me to believe that she had at one time moved in good circles, for she frequently mentioned the names of distinguished people, with whom she implied, rather than stated, she had an acquaintance in other days. These, no doubt, were persons whose existence became known to her whilst she served as Lady Estmere's maid. One day she said to me—

“You know many people in London, I suppose?”

“A great many.”

“Do you know any people named Estmere?”

I could scarcely repress my start of astonishment. For a moment I hesitated how to answer her question.

"I know a Lady Estmere, and her son Valentine."

"Those are whom I mean. What is she like now?"

"She is very good-looking, although her hair is quite white. Did you know her?"

"Yes, before I was married."

I said no more, thinking it better to wait her pleasure.

"Is she happy?" she asked after a pause.

"How can she be happy? Her husband left her years ago, and they tell me will never return to her."

"But great ladies get over that sort of thing, don't they?"

"I am not a great lady, Mrs. Merton, so can't say."

I wondered whether the woman was beginning to feel compunction—whether, if I

led her to the point, she would make a clean breast. But it was too early to risk such a step.

“Do you know Sir Laurence Estmere?” she asked.

“No. Since he left his wife he has wandered over the face of the earth, a wretched man, I believe.”

There was a most curious expression in the woman’s eyes. It was half-sorrowful, half-triumphant.

“Twenty years is a long time,” she said.

“It is a long time—a long time for a woman to bear the blame of the world, a long time for her to see her son’s prospects blasted; a son she loves most likely as fondly as you love yours. Of course, whatever happened was before my time; but if Lady Estmere is blameless, what must be the feelings of those who are to blame?”

I said more than I intended to say. She

gave me a startled look, with suspicion clearly marked in it.

“No one can say Lady Estmere is blameless,” she said, almost sullenly.

“No, so long as her husband condemns her. But she is a friend of mine, and I respect her. How did you know her history? Was she a friend of yours?”

“I knew her slightly, but I heard all the talk at the time. You must please excuse me, Mr. Norris. I have one of my headaches coming on, and must go and lie down.”

I left her feeling sure that matters were coming to a crisis. I scarcely knew whether to hope or to fear I had raised any suspicion in her mind that I was particularly interested in getting at the truth concerning Lady Estmere. Still I felt something was afoot which would help me in the task I had undertaken—some accident or fatality.

But a week went by quietly enough, the only thing of note being that Mrs. Merton

was trying to avoid me. I did not go to the house so often now. School had reopened, and Charley's proper tutors took my place. Still, several evenings I called in and helped him with his studies. Each time Mrs. Merton, after a few polite words, disappeared, and I saw her no more. She showed me no animosity, and I hoped that on some future occasion I might find the chance of bringing up the subject of the Estmeres once more, and jogging her conscience, if she had one to jog. I almost decided that I would tell her all I knew, all I suspected, and try and force the truth from her.

The last few days Mrs. Merton was not looking well. She gave as a reason want of sleep. This I knew was true, as every night when I went to bed I saw her room lit up. I never went to rest until very late, and as I saw that light I wondered at a woman being up at such an unorthodox hour.

One night I was undressing myself and now and again glancing across the road. My window was wide open, and the venetian blind turned so that I could see through it without obstruction. Mrs. Merton's lamp was burning brilliantly. "I wonder what the woman is doing at such a time!" I said to myself; and wished I could look through that white blind which covered her window.

Presently I saw her shadow; she must have moved the lamp to the back of the room. No one can judge what a person's actions are from a shadow on the blind, but I was more than puzzled at one movement of that dark figure. It seemed to mount on a chair or something to raise it and was stretching its shadowy arms above its head. I was watching it disgusted with my inability to read the meaning of the action, when suddenly the light in the room appeared to grow ten times more brilliant, and the

shadow vanished. Before I had time to think what had occurred I heard a piercing shriek—the blind was torn down from the window and I saw Mrs. Merton standing there enveloped in flames. The look of terror on her face froze my blood. It was but for a second I saw her. She rushed away from the window and disappeared. I had seen enough to show me that some dreadful accident had happened. Quickly throwing on my coat I ran down-stairs, and in a few moments was hammering at Mrs Merton's door eager to render what aid I could. For a while no one responded to my summons, but I could hear piercing shrieks inside the house. Then the door opened suddenly, and young Merton, with very little clothes upon him, rushed out nearly overturning me. "My mother! The doctor!" I heard him gasp as he passed, and ran wildly up the road. I entered the house, and closing the door behind me went

up-stairs. In such a moment there was no need of ceremony, so I at once proceeded to the room whence those cries of anguish came. A fearful sight met my eyes !

Mrs. Merton was lying on the floor writhing in agony like a worm beneath the heel. Her body from the waist downwards was only covered by a mass of charred, half-burnt garments. The arms were bare, the sleeves of her dress having apparently been burned off, and her hands and arms were pitifully scorched, no doubt in her efforts to extinguish the flames. Her daughter, half-distracted, was kneeling beside her, and the servant was wringing her hands and almost stupid with fright.

The situation needed no explanation. In some way, no doubt, when I saw her reaching up, the poor woman had brought her lower garments in contact with the flame of the lamp. The moment she found out

what had happened, presence of mind had deserted her. In her pain and terror she had first of all rushed to the window as if to seek succour in that direction. Afterwards she must have run wildly to her daughter's room, where the flames were either extinguished or burned themselves out ; but not before severe, probably fatal, injuries had been inflicted.

I lifted the poor wretch from the floor, and carrying her as tenderly as I could to her room, laid her on her own bed. Her sufferings appeared to me to be excruciating, and I deeply regretted that it was not in my power to allay the tortures, the severity of which was clearly shown by the spasmodic contractions of the muscles of her face. I could do no more to help her than the women. We could but wait and hope that the doctor would arrive.

He came at last, and as he examined his

patient shook his head ominously. I stayed in the house as long as there was any service I could render to the poor people ; then I went across to my own quarters, but before going begged the doctor to give me a call when he left Mrs. Merton.

He remained with her for hours, applying what remedies he could, trying to the best of his ability to make the anguish bearable. Then he came across to me.

“It’s a bad job—a very bad job,” he said.

“Will she die ?” I asked.

“I don’t see how she can recover. She is terribly burnt. If she had only shown presence of mind enough to jump into bed and roll all the clothes round she would have come off with a few scorches. No, like a true woman, she rushes out and screams for help.”

“Is she in immediate danger ?”

“No, I think not. I shall know

better when I see her by-and-by. Good morning."

The doctor left me, and I sat down to think. I was of course much upset by the scene I had witnessed. A fellow-creature reduced in a second, by an act of carelessness, to such a pitiable condition must touch the hardest heart. No one could see his worst enemy in such a plight without feeling moved. But I had more than sentimental reasons to distress me. What if Mrs. Merton should die with her lips sealed? Her death would then destroy every hope of getting at the bottom of Chesham's villainy. I could scarcely believe such a thing could be possible. I preferred to think that even this tragic affair was all of a part with the other fortuitous circumstances which had aided my quest. Either Mrs. Merton would recover, or if she died would speak the

truth. I was anxious, but I was not so fearful of her carrying her secret to the grave as it seems natural I should have been.

However, she lingered on for several days. The doctor held out little hope. "I do not think she can recover," was his constant opinion. I was regular with my inquiries at the house, and really pitying the distress of the boy and girl, begged them to make use of me in any way they wished. I ardently longed for a few minutes' talk with the dying woman—perhaps, with the fear of death before her, she might consent to tell all she knew. I smiled as I thought of how many destinies might be changed by a few words from her lips. Lady Estmere's, Sir Laurence Estmere's, Valentine's, and in a lesser degree my father's, Claudine's, and mine. I grew more and more anxious as the days

passed by and the doctor still shook his head.

One morning, before the doctor's visit, young Merton told me that he believed his mother was better—the pain had almost left her. She lay so quietly in her bed now, that the boy spoke hopefully of her recovery. But when I saw the doctor he had another tale to tell.

"It's only a question of hours now with the poor woman," he said.

I was aghast. "Her son told me she was better—that the pain had diminished," I said.

"Yes, she will not feel much more pain. As I feared, mortification is setting in. It is all up with her."

"Is she conscious—strong enough to see any one?"

"Yes, but she is very weak, and the weakness will increase. There can be no

objection to you seeing her if you wish to do so."

"Does she know she is dying?"

"Yes, she asked me. It would have been a poor mercy to deny it."

I felt that I must take immediate steps to obtain an interview with Mrs. Merton, or all my trouble would be of no avail. To-morrow, even this afternoon, might be too late. I must see her at once.

I was, however, spared any difficulty. Shortly after the doctor left me, Charley Merton crossed the road; his eyes were red with weeping.

"If you please, Mr. Norris," he said, "mother would be so glad to say a few words to you before she dies."

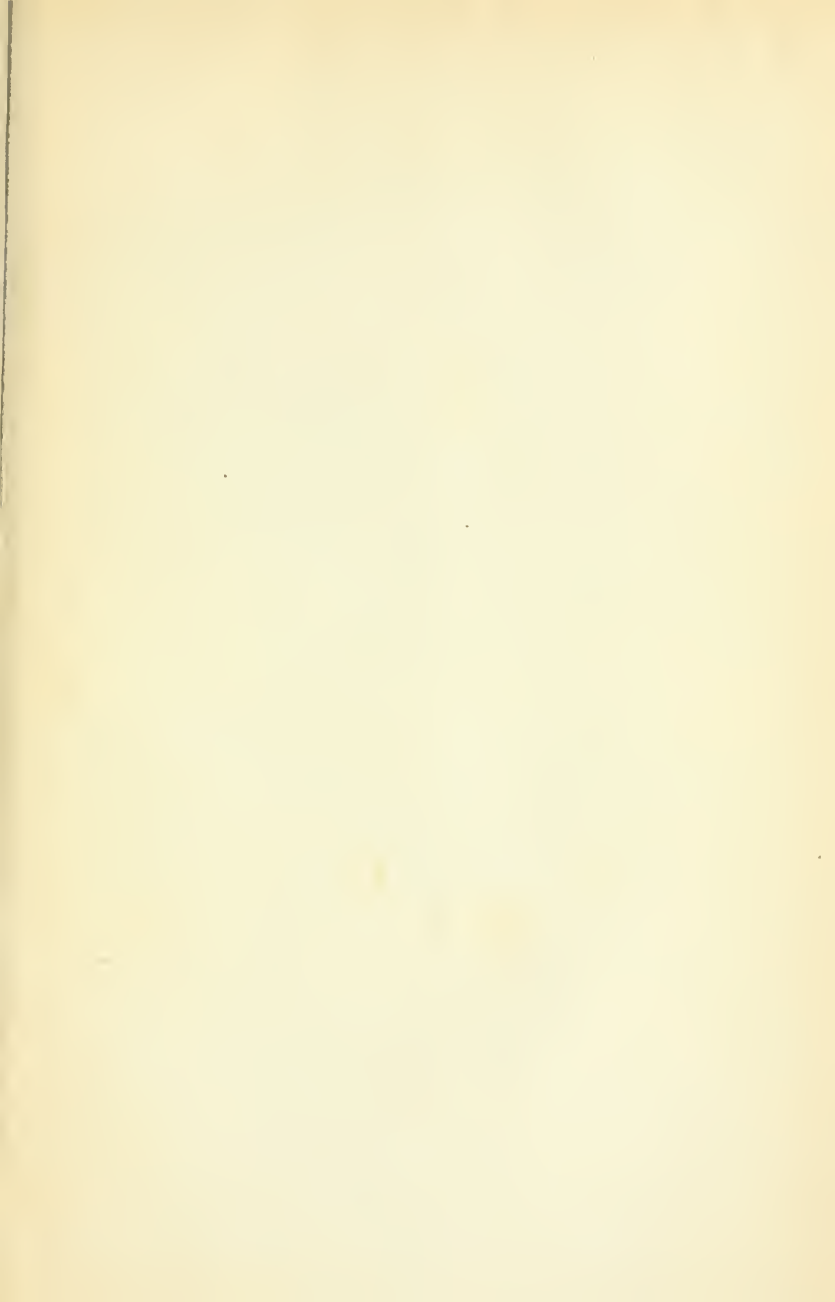
He spoke in a mechanical way, as though scarcely understanding the meaning of the message he bore.

In spite of the throb my heart gave, I

pitied the lad. "I will come at once," I said, rising from my chair.

Then I followed the boy to his home, fully assured that I should leave it with my self-imposed mission accomplished. 22

END OF VOLUME II.



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